

Editor's Foreword:

As always, I tried to leave as much intact of the original release as I could, while still fixing things such as names and such (In particular the name of the boat this story takes place on is called the *Pacific Chrysalis*, but was mistakenly called the *Pacific Christmas* throughout the original releases).

Another point of interest: there are a lot of problems taking a PDF and editing it in Word. Most specifically the line breaks get all messed up, and it's a PAIN to fix. I used a new method this time around that was about 5x faster and less work, but only about 95% accurate. Nothing jumped out at me while reading it, but some of the paragraph breaks may be a little different on accident, I hope you can forgive me.

Well, enjoy!

~Moonfaerie24

Translator's Foreword:

Well, here it is, as promised, the next installment of the Full Metal Panic long story novels, "A Dancing Very Merry Christmas". I do want to make a few notes beforehand:

In Japan, Christmas is considered more of a "lover's holiday"- it does not really hold the same meaning in Japan as it does in Western culture.

I want to go ahead and state that I was lucky enough to have my hard drive catastrophically crash on me, thus causing me to lose about a month's worth of work. This means? I get to re-translate everything I lost, which will probably take me another month to get back to where I was. Sorry, but that's how it goes, sometimes.

Anyway, I guess all I'm asking for is a little patience ☺ We here at Boku-tachi want to give the people what they want as much as they want it.

Also, I would like to thank Black_Rhapsody for editing the picture as I don't have a computer of my own at the moment.

Hmm, I guess that's really all. Again, I will apologize beforehand for the inevitable mistakes, and I hope you enjoy this new story in the continuing *Full Metal Panic!* saga.

-Brandi

Full Metal Panic!

Dancing Very Merry Christmas

By Shoji Gotoh



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Prologue

“There’s no way we could reject such an invitation, Ms. Tsuboi,” a few of the members sent from the Board of Education, along with several officers from the parents’ association, stressed to Principal Takako Tsuboi.

“Of course, we realize that this is sudden. But next year our second year students will have to prepare for examinations, so this will be the only opportunity they get. And if this field trip that has been so painstakingly arranged for them is spoiled, I’m sure the students would be very disappointed.”

“Ahh...” Principal Tsuboi said in a faint voice. She was a middle-aged woman over 50, and was wearing a simple suit. She seemed to have aged suddenly because of the waves of trouble that had hit her school ever since this year had begun.

“It’s an important memory for young people. And the hijacking. Honestly. The scars on the students’ hearts must be immeasurable. I express my sympathy once again.”

“Thank you...” Principal Tsuboi said for now. But to her knowledge, there weren’t any innocent students whose hearts had been wounded by the affair.

No one cared. In fact, they bragged about it to the seniors, juniors, and students at other schools. Instead of the original plan to tour of the Okinawa front, it ended up being like a ride at a strange theme park. Before worrying about the wounded hearts of the students, she wanted some compassion for her position of having those kids as students, Principal Tsuboi thought deep down.

The man from the Board of Education continued.

“Well, how about it? Mr. Kaneyama from the Mishima Memorial Education Foundation, who was grieved about the

incident, has made special arrangements. We want the Jindai High School students to have memories of a modest trip.”

As he said this, he laid a pamphlet on the reception table.

First she saw the picture of a beautiful, enormous boat. It was a cruise boat sailing along over a deep blue ocean, underneath a clear blue sky. There were a ton of windows, as well a complex tier of decks. Its streamlined bow was kicking up the white waves.

“It’s called the *Pacific Chrysalis*. This around-the-world cruise liner is planning to leave from Yokohama Port on December 24th for a short overnight cruise.”

“...this luxury liner for my students?”

“Yes. They have been invited. But don’t worry- even though it’s a luxury liner, it isn’t a formal thing. Recently, cruise ships have become popular all around the world. Wearing casual clothes is okay. Well- when you look at it, it’s a theme park on the ocean, basically. It’s the same cost per person as a domestic trip.”

“Ahh...”

“It’ll be enough if you just think of it as a trip to Tokyo Disneyland. And the departure place, Yokohama, is not far by train. Since there are no airplanes involved, it’s completely safe. How about it, Ms. Tsuboi? This is a great favor from the Mishima Foundation. I urge you to think positively about it.”

Of course, it really wasn’t a bad idea. And Principal Tsuboi had not heard anything bad about the Mishima Memorial Foundation, either. They were a legitimate organization that did a whole lot of charity work. Their efforts at international goodwill, medical support for poor countries, and cultural exchanges were well known, even in North Korea. When she thought about the country which had become the setting for the hijacking drama, receiving this kind of proposal didn’t seem all that unnatural.

This officer's talk seemed to suggest the possibility that this invitation matter might be announced as a small article in the local news section of the newspaper. Even though she thought that her school didn't need any more publicity, well, just that wouldn't be too bad. And since it was true that the students were very unhappy about having their field trip cancelled without having anything to make up for it-

"Very well, we will consider the offer."

"Good! I knew you would."

"However, I cannot make the decision completely on my own. I have to discuss it with the faculty, as well as see how it affects the year event schedule."

"Of course. Discuss it thoroughly with them. Please know that the Board of Education welcomes this proposal. The rest is up to the Jindai High School students."

From the side, the quiet but genial members of the parents' association each nodded.

"We are of the same opinion, Ms. Tsuboi."

"Please enjoy yourselves by all means," both the Board of Education and parents' association urged strongly. Tsuboi didn't know of any way to resist after that.

In a staff meeting several days later, the invitation to take the hopeful students on this trip was approved.



The following week.

Before final exams, during homeroom for second year, class four-

“Oka-y! Is everyone ready? Okay, everyone read over it carefully” said their homeroom teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, after passing the printouts to the students.

“It’s sudden, but instead of a field trip, we’ve decided to do this. It overlaps with the last day of school, but it departs on the 24th. Because of the kindness of a certain organization, it seems our second year students have been invited on this ship’s Christmas cruise. Exciting, isn’t it!? Such a large luxury ship! There’s a smorgasbord of fine cuisine! There are also plenty of amusements, like a pool, sports facility, shopping center, game center, and much more. There will also be events like a concert or a musical, movie showings, as well as a present raffle. And it’s free, of course!”

“Oooh~” the students all exclaimed at the same time.

“Since participation is voluntary, fill out the forms I’ve given you thoroughly and get your parent or guardian to sign them. Okay, shall I explain the important points?”

Eri began the detailed explanation. They had until sometime the following week to prepare copies of their insurance cards, the consent forms from their parents, and the photographs for their on-board ID cards. Those wearing altered uniforms would not be allowed to board. People with chronic diseases or allergies should consult with their physician in advance- this and that.

Without really hearing any of the explanation, Kaname Chidori stared absent-mindedly at the handout. Kyouko Tokiwa, who was sitting in the seat next to her, whispered, “Hey, hey, Kaname- are you going?”

“Hmm? ...oh, that. Well, as long as it’s free. I’ll go, I guess,” she replied, keeping her eyes glued to the agenda for the cruise trip printed on the handout.

December 24th. That day would be Kaname's 17th birthday.

Christmas Eve was her birthday.

Most people might think it had a romantic feel to it, but she only had memories of being at a disadvantage because of that date. Her parents would give her both her Christmas presents as well as her birthday presents together; on the other hand, her sister, whose birthday was in May, would receive her presents separately- when Kaname was a child, this was the beginning of many fights. These fights always ended the same way, with a "Kaname, you're the oldest. Live with it."

Now it seemed that her father and sister would be staying in New York for Christmas this year. Kaname was fine with not seeing her father, with whom she didn't have a very good relationship.

While Kaname mulled over these thoughts, Eri topped off her speech.

"That's all the details. Now, are there any questions?"

"I have one," said the male student sitting in the chair by the window- Sousuke Sagara, as he immediately raised his hand. He had a serious look on his taciturn face. Out of all the students who were ecstatic over the spontaneous event, he was the only one wrinkling his brow and making a difficult face.

"Sagara. What is it?"

"There are some imperfections in these consent forms," Sousuke said as he flipped through the forms he had received. "It does not touch on the subject concerning what to do in case of some kind of trouble during the trip... and there is absolutely no explanation as to how the school will respond in the event of terrorist activity."

"What are you talking about...?"

“Just this year our school should have learned a harsh lesson.”

“Please don’t say such an ominous thing. Such a thing doesn’t happen two or three times! If people worried about every little thing, no school anywhere would ever be able to go on a field trip or outings!”

“It’s dangerous to underestimate,” Souseki stated very knowledgeably. “Last time we were lucky, but the next time could end up a real tragedy. Do you remember the sea jacking affair of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro in 1985?”

“T-the Achille Lauro...”

“In that incident, one of the hostages was shot in the chest and head and thrown into the sea. Except for the one old man in a wheelchair, there was almost no resistance.”

“...”

“The terrorists made three of the hostages carry hand grenades with the safety removed and gather the remaining hostages in their area. Their fear was probably indescribable. If one of the people carrying the hand grenades had been just a little careless, who knows how many innocent people would have been brutally blown up. Pieces of brain and internal organs would have been scattered everywhere, peoples’ lives ending in agony... Fear and confusion. Those are the tools that terrorists use. We must not forget that.”

Before anyone knew it, a heavy atmosphere had settled over the room. The students, who had been so excited over the news about the extravagant affair, were as silent as if they had just been splashed by cold water.

“But don’t worry. As the aide to the student president in charge of the security problem, I will protect everyone without fail. I would like to request permission to bring along machine guns, C4

explosives, and directivity landmines. If we make good use of our weapons and tactics, we will completely exterminate any sea-jackers, and try to suppress the bloodshed-

“Gesh!!”

Kaname had rushed over to Souseki and kicked him over. Souseki laid on the floor wrapped up in the middle of several desks.

“What are you doing, Chidori?”

“Shut up! Just when everyone was so happy- why don’t you use some common sense!?”

“But the warning signs of a tragedy are-”

“Don’t talk about warning signs or tragedies!!”

“But the Achille Lauro-”

“I said shut up!! Take that, and that!”

“Ouch. That hurts, Chidori.”

“You’re the one who’s the pain!”

Kaname charged Souseki and tackled him using sumo maneuvers^{*1} until her classmates restrained her.

Chapter 1: The Plans Are Not Yet Fixed

December 21st, 01:35 (Local Time)
Spratly Islands

They've really done a number on this island setting up a base, Sousuke Sagara thought admirably, without even thinking about the island that his own unit used as their base.

Using the AS's night vision sensors, he looked over the dark green sea. Rising from the middle was the problem island, which was barely two kilometers in width. At the top of the rugged, several-hundred meter tall rocky mountain there was a thick growth of a few shrubs and dry grass.

This was the corner of the numerous islands that made up the Spratly Islands.

There were a few radar antennas that had been set up in some high locations. He could see the figures of sentries wearing night vision goggles. There were a lot of magnetic sensor mines floating in the ocean which surrounded the area, making it incredibly difficult for a special purpose submarine to approach.

For a pirate's hideout, one could say that it had some very strong security. An ordinary force would not have been able to get close to it. A run-of-the-mill force, that is.

The Arm Slave which Sousuke piloted- the ARX-7 Arbalest, had just arrived on the north bank of the "Pirate's Island".

According to the mission briefing, there was a small harbor and dock on the south bank of the island.

For several months, the small, high-speed ship that the pirates had been using to attack merchant ships that had been passing through the adjacent waters had been anchored there.

There were also pillaged articles, supplies, as well as a storehouse of weapons ammunitions.

Sousuke was grappling his way up the foot of a very steep cliff. The white-crested waves violently broke over the rocks. Sousuke climbed up the north bank cliff like this, planning to assault the hideout on the south bank side from behind.

If flesh and blood soldiers were to try to land here, the power of the waves would repeatedly throw them up on the ominously shaped rocks and kill them. A secret landing on this kind of terrain could only be attempted by the human-shaped weapon known as the AS.

There was no light other than the dim clouds which were hiding the moon in the night sky.

In the pitch darkness, the dark gray silhouette of the Arbalest crawled up the rocky area, the sound of the propulsion drive for its electromagnetic muscles humming faintly.

When he arrived at a place high enough that the spray from the raging waters wouldn't reach, Sousuke turned the Arbalest's ECS on to Invisibility Mode. Various parts of the armor moved, exposing a lens-shaped part. A hologram screen enveloped the AS, and its form blended into the surrounding air.

Just then, he received a communications from his allies.

"Uruz 6 to Uruz 7. Haven't you gotten there yet? I'm tired of waiting," Sergeant Kurz Weber pressed him. He was in a sniping position on the south side of the island- in the middle of the calm waves.

"This is Uruz 7. I'm not there yet. Remain on standby."

"Damn it, get a move on, then. You have a wire gun, right? You could hurry up and climb that kind of cliff with it."

"If some rocks were to fall, then the enemy guards would be alerted."

“Then just shut ‘em up with a taser. I swear you really are-”

“Over and out,” Sousuke said, cutting the transmission. He then groaned under his breath, “Really...”

He had gone through a lot of trouble up to this point in order to slip through the enemy’s alarms. If he had been an average pilot, he would have tripped up one of the mines and been killed a long time ago- if he were to be noticed by the guards, the mission would be cancelled.

<Alert message. It is now fifteen minutes past time of scheduled attack. You must soon maneuver to Way Point Foxtrot.>

It wasn’t just Kurz; now even Al, the Arbalest’s AI, was rushing him.

“Shut up.”

<Roger... however, a piece of advice first. According to statistics, in this kind of situation, the danger of making a mistake doubles because of the feeling of impatience to complete a mission. In order to calm the mind, I recommend singing a song. I have prepared 50 of the latest hit numbers, so if you have a request->

This kind of joking attitude helped a little, but Al’s very deep, monotone voice started to get on Sousuke’s nerves.

“I didn’t give you any orders to prepare music. Don’t waste storage capacity without approval.”

<It is not a problem. It only takes up a mere one or two gigabytes.>

“Delete them all. If you don’t, I’ll destroy you for the sake of the mission.”

<I interpret that message to be a joke. Another joke is an effective counter-measure. I have prepared 50 volumes of jokes to make humans laugh, so if you have a request->

“It’s not a joke, it’s a threat.”

<Excuse me.>

After that, Al was quiet. Inside the cockpit, Sousuke wearily shook his head; in response to the movement, the Arbalest also moved its head in the same way.

Really, an AI that gives that kind of ridiculous advice? The controlling support system of this machine saying “sing a song”, of all things.

Since Hong Kong, this AI’s speech and conduct had become stranger day by day. It increasingly would talk without permission, which was all the more puzzling since there were no obvious malfunctions detected. The technicians said that, by Al’s request, they would connect the circuit to FM radio or BS television so that it could receive the programming on them- but perhaps Sousuke should have them stop that from now on.

Using its manipulators and leg spikes at the same time, the Arbalest carefully made its way up the cliff. The ECS was operating without any problems. There were several times it seemed he would fall while letting the sentries on the cliff above him pass by- Five minutes later, Sousuke finally reached the determined point. He then informed the team leader of his position.

“Uruz 7 to Uruz 2. I have reached Way Point Golf.”

He received an answer shortly after.

“Uruz 2, roger. Well then, let’s get this party started, alright? Preset your ADM. Everyone, do a final check and report,” said Second Lieutenant Melissa Mao without riding on Sousuke for being late.

“Uruz 6, nooo problems.”

“Uruz 7, ready.”

“Gebo 3, ready.”

“Gebo 4, ready.”

The two helicopters waiting on standby over the sea two miles from the island answered after Kurz and Sousuke. Thanks to

the new low sound system that had been introduced recently, even the Arbalest's hearing sensors were barely able to detect the sounds of their rotors and engines.

On each of those helicopters were 20 members of the land force unit, ready to gain total control of the enemy base after the AS attack.

"...Okay. Ahem," Mao cleared her throat after everyone had finished reporting, then raised her voice, "Well then, begin attack! Go, go, go!"

"AI, cancel ECS, and change battle maneuvers to military power."

<Roger. ECS, off. GPL, military master mode 2.>

The ECS cancelled, and all power switched to battle maneuvers. Under the lavender night sky, the white AS surged up from the blue harbor front, appearing on the summit of the rocky mountain.

When the one sleeping pirate in the nearby watchtower noticed, his jaw dropped. The panicked guard was indecisive as to whether to reach for his machine gun or the alarm switch, and in the end screamed and fainted without touching either. The built-in taser in the Arbalest's palm had knocked the man out with a glaring current of electricity.

"It's begun," Sousuke said without the man ever seeing him.

<Roger.>

Linked to Sousuke's arms in the cockpit, the Arbalest's arms moved. He aimed his Italian, Oto Melara-manufactured "Boxer" shot cannon at the pirate base below him. He had his choice of targets.

The command center, munitions storehouse, old, unmanned ASes, anti-aircraft vehicles...

Aligning his sight with the roof of the munitions storehouse, Sousuke pulled the trigger.

There was a heavy shock. The anti-armor shrapnel, which was loaded into the Boxer, blew the roof off of the storehouse, and ignited the ammunition inside.

There was a tremendous explosion. A pillar of fire scorched the night sky, informing everyone that the battle had started.

<E3 destroyed. Great balls of fire.>

“Quit talking nonsense.”

Al’s words were sounding like Kurz’s jokes. Clicking his tongue, Sousuke aimed for the next target.



Ten seconds into the battle, the victor was already pretty much decided.

Without any resistance, the surprise attack from Sousuke and the others destroyed the pirate’s control center, munitions storehouse, and high speed ships which had been anchored down, causing the pirates to collapse into a state of chaos. What was this kind of solitary island equipped for? The old Soviet made ASes, Rk-89 Shamrocks, which were lined up in the center of the base, were destroyed before the pilots could board them by the ruthless marksmanship of Mao’s AS from the sea.

While Mao’s AS- an M9 Gernsback- was submerged up to the hip in the ocean water, it slowly advanced towards the pirate’s harbor. Kurz, who was behind her in a sniper’s position, and Sousuke, who was at the summit of the mountain, provided cover-fire for her.

“Hah hah. This is like playing at a game center!” Kurz laughed over the radio.

“Uruz 6, don’t get careless. We still haven’t taken control of the base yet. Most of the time, just when we get all caught up in the moment, then.”

A loud roaring sound cut her off, and a large waterspout rose up close on the right-hand side of her machine. It was caused by a detonation at point-blank range.

“...!! What was that just now!? It didn’t come from the base!”

Mao’s machine turned aside as it was doused in a sheet of spray, turning its head radar left and right.

“Uruz 2! From the direction of 3 o’clock, distance four. Eight high speed enemy ships,” warned Sousuke, whose position at the top of the mountain gave him a wider field of vision than Mao below him. Using the high speed ADM (advanced data modem), Al silently forwarded the information caught by the Arbalest’s sensors to the ally units.

Eight high-speed boats approached, wrapping around the island’s west bank. Since it was also a blind spot from where Sousuke was, he had been late in detecting them. More than likely, the pirates were on their way back from a raid. It was the worst timing.

Their speed was 40 knots. That would be about 74 kilometers an hour^{*2}.

They were rather small, but it seemed that they were equipped with 20mm Gatling guns and bazookas. The eight ships kicked up the spray from the waves, and attacked Mao with various weapons.

As these new enemies showered her with a barrage of concentrated fire, she cursed out loud.

“Ahhh... son of a bitch, what the hell happened!? All their boats are anchored at the base, right!? Why are new ones coming!?”

“Same thing as usual, of course. The information was wrong. I wish they’d give us a break already...” Kurz muttered.

“Stop complaining and do something!!”

“Do something, she says... I’m already on number two!”

The 76mm bullet shot by Kurz’s machine hit, and the pirate ship blew up.

“You’re only on two!?”

“Don’t be absurd. I’m far away- and the target is fast. Damn it, if only I had a Hellfire or a Versailles,” Kurz said as impatiently as usual.

“Hellfire” and “Versailles” were the names of guidance missiles that the ASes used. The position in which Kurz was assigned to provide cover fire was at a perfect distance for secure aim, but it wasn’t suitable for aiming at high-speed targets moving at forty knots. You could almost call it a miracle that Kurz had been able to sink two of them already.

There were still six left.

Those six boats made a dash to surround Mao’s M9, and mercilessly bombarded her machine with shells and rockets. The machine gun on the head area of Mao’s machine roared, already filling one of the boats full of lead- but there were still five left.

“Eeee, those restless sons of...! ...this is really bad!”

Slashing through the heavy ocean water, the M9 bravely took up evasive maneuvers as violent waterspouts spurted up one after the other all around it. Even though the M9 was agile and impervious to bullets, it was probably impossible for it to beat the enemy’s fierce attacks.



<Sergeant. Uruz 2 is in danger. Fire at the enemy high-speed boats.>

Al said to Sousuke, who was only watching from the rocky mountain without even providing any cover fire.

“It would be useless from this distance. There’s also not enough ammunition left.”

<Fire at the enemy high-speed boats. There are no other options.>

“Options, huh? In that case, there is one,” and as soon as he said it, Sousuke made the Arbalest step back a few paces, then judging the timing, he suddenly sprinted forward.

<Sergeant. This angle is->

“Shut up and help out.”

A moment later, the Arbalest kicked off of the edge of the mountain and jumped towards the sea.

The slim silhouette of the Arbalest danced in midair against the background of the silver moon.

When the machine started to fall in an arc, Sousuke shot the wire gun located in his arm.

The anchor on the end of the wire sharply pierced into one of the high-speed boats beneath him.

He quickly recoiled the wire. The machine, which had been swimming around in mid-air, was instantly pulled forwards and made a “landing” on one of the high-speed boats.

There was the shrill shriek of metal and a sheet of spray.

The boat sank down so far it almost capsized, and the hull was crushed.

On a human scale, it was like someone jumping onto a rowboat.

“Hey hey hey...!!” Kurz yelled in surprise.

The men on the boat on which the Arbalest had landed were literally on their butts staring up at the Arbalest. Sousuke thrust his monomolecular cutter into the deck, skillfully balancing his machine, and fired the 12.7mm machine gun on the Arbalest's head. He made beehives out of the engine compartment and weapons equipment, and in a moment the boat was helpless.

"That's the gist of it. Now we're going to jump from one boat to another."

The Arbalest then kicked off of the boat from which black smoke was now rising, jumping towards the next. He aimed at the high-speed boat which was sailing ahead, and once again fired the wire gun from his left arm. The high-output motor in the gun then retrieved the wire very quickly.

Landing!

He used his machine gun to sweep across the violently shaking boat, destroying the engine and gun turret.

The Arbalest's sensor quickly scanned the surrounding area. The closest sailing ship shot a rocket in Sousuke's direction.

A red light was coming straight towards him.

"...!"

Just before the shell hit him, Sousuke jumped for a third time. The high-speed boat that he had just been on a moment earlier was hit by the rocket and exploded. With the flames to his back, Sousuke twisted the Arbalest around in mid-air.

He aimed at an enemy boat bombarding him with fire, and rushing down on it from the sky, the Arbalest made its third successful landing. The pirates scrambled to run away, jumping into the dark sea.

<Sergeant. These kinds of tactics are unimaginable. This is nonsense.>

“You think so?” Sousuke said as he maneuvered the machine. “Well then, tell me the meaning of nonsense.”

<Unreasonable, absurd, lacking common sense.>

“You really are just a machine.”

Taking aim at the now empty gun platform and engine compartment, the Arbalest discharged its boxer canon.



After that, a one-sided fight continued.

All of the high-speed boats were destroyed, and the pirates on the base were routed.

Mao’s M9 landed on the island, and proceeded to go around smashing the remaining weapons from one end. She then switched on her external speakers, and in Cantonese, Mandarin, and three dialects of Vietnamese advised the pirates to surrender. She mercilessly called on her taser against those who stubbornly resisted.

Then the support transport helicopter unit arrived. One platoon completely armed with massive bulletproof clothing and bulletproof plastic shields dropped from the helicopters hovering under the protection of Sousuke’s team, and raided a room that the ASes couldn’t reach. Finally, reports were received from every unit charged with gaining control of their respective areas.

Within a few minutes, the surrendered pirates were tied together and gathered on the dock.

And with that, the mission was complete.

“Good grief, that was an unexpected pain in the ass.”

Kurz’s machine beat its way through the smoke to finally make it back to the island from its previous sniper’s position in the middle of the ocean. The silhouettes of his and Mao’s Gernsbacks

looked very much like that of the Arbalest, with their long, slender arms and legs, and their almost squished hips. The gray armor was drenched with ocean water, and drops of water were trickling down here and there.

“We should be happy just because Venom wasn’t here,” Sousuke said as he returned the shot cannon back to the hard point on the Arbalest’s waist.

To the Arbalest’s side were the pirates, who had thrown away their weapons and were sitting down, as well as the land soldiers who were watching over them.

The pirates had looks of discontent- like they had just lost in an unfair game. They just couldn’t comprehend how their stronghold, which they had thought to be impregnable, had been so easily defeated by the weapons called ASes.

“This is Uruz 9. The land unit has gained control of every section. The damage to our side was only two with light injuries. There are no obstacles to our movements. On the pirates’ side, there are eight dead, four seriously injured and ten with light injuries,” the leader of the infantry unit, Corporal Yang Jun-Kyu, reported over the radio.

There seemed to be some pirates who were shot to death resisting. However, they were people who attacked merchant ships and killed many of the crews on those ships. Using tasers and tear gas bombs to convince them to surrender- they had been nice until now, so any deaths were due to their own stubbornness.

“But was there really a need for Mithril to get involved against these kinds of pirates?” Kurz complained, looking down on the group of prisoners with the head sensors.

“This is the Spratly Islands. North and South China, Vietnam, Taiwan... each nation’s sphere of influence has been jumbled together into a mosaic. Just because of that, it would be

difficult for a regular army to carry out a large-scale operation. This was explained in the briefing," Sousuke said, and Kurz's M9 waved its left hand impatiently.

"I already know that."

"Also, this operation was not simply about suppressing the pirates. The name of this island is very important."

Badamu Island. The name of this one island, which had become the base for a group of pirates. This island had many names from the countries that contended possession of the Spratly Islands as well as from the Westerners who once ruled these islands. In Mandarin, the island's name was "Badamu"^{*3}, the word he had heard from Gauron in Hong Kong.

Since it was a commonplace name without any connections, even Mithril probably had not noticed it. However, it was a different story that the island had been named the base of the pirates who were causing commotion in the Spratly Islands coastal waters. After careful investigation and reconnaissance, there seemed to be only a small possibility that this island was connected with Amalgam, but- on the other hand, they couldn't disprove it, either.

"This is Uruz 8 to everyone," Corporal Spake, who was investigating the warehouse area of the pirate base, reported over the radio just then. "There's only weapons ammunitions and heroin here. There are also containers of vanadium, but- it's just things they plundered. Probably the cargo from the Peru merchant ship that they attacked week before last."

"Vanadium?"

"It's a rare metal. The M9's you guys are piloting even use it. Because of the civil war in the Soviet Union, the trouble in Nan'a... for the past four or five years, the price has been going up. Well, it falls short of heroin, but it's hard to trace."

“My, aren’t we just the expert?” Kurz groaned in a small voice.

“I’ve been trading stocks recently. Read the business section or something for a change. If all you do is fight, you end up looking stupid.”

“Shuddup, you gambling freak.”

Sousuke then interrupted the verbal exchange between Kurz and Spake.

“There are no other important goods, are there? Precision machinery or AS parts?”

“Nothing. This is just an authentic pirate’s safe house. There doesn’t seem to be any connection with Amalgam.”

“We don’t know that for sure, yet. We haven’t tried questioning the commander of the base,” Mao said. Her M9 then moved to the summit of the rocky mountain, and kept a lookout over the surrounding area.

“This is Uruz 9. Ah- ...about that commanding officer, well, it doesn’t look like he’s among the prisoners. It’s not like... he wouldn’t be on the base, but...”

“This is Uruz 7. He may be dressed up as one of the subordinates and hiding as one of them. Or he may still be somewhere on the island...”

Just as Sousuke said that, he noticed something.

The Arbalest’s sensors projected the slope of the mountain. He saw a man’s shadow moving on the other side of a bare rock overlooking the port. The darkness and the smoke from the fires made it terribly blurry, but it seemed to Sousuke that the man was carrying an anti-tank missile over his shoulder.

No- there was no mistake about it. He was aiming the anti-tank missile straight towards him from overhead.

Just as Sousuke confirmed it, the man fired the missile.

“Sousuke, just now—”

<Warning! ATM!>

Kurz and Al alerted him at the same time. It was at short range, but with the Arbalest’s mobility, it would have been easy to quickly jump back and avoid it. However, behind him- in other words, there would be dozens of prisoners as well as allied infantry straight in the missile’s path.

If he avoided it, they would all be hit by the missile.

It was a split-second decision. Sousuke, without making any maneuvers to avoid, turned to face the oncoming missile straight on.

There was a bright flash and thunderous roar.

The anti-tank missile had hit the Arbalest straight in the chest.

“Damn it!”

In the blink of an eye, Kurz’s M9 fired the 12.7mm machine gun on its head at full auto.

Immediately, dozens of bullets about the size of Tabasco bottles were discharged, and the body of the man who shot the missile was blown off of the rock, scattering in all directions.

“Sousuke!?” Kurz yelled, looking back.

In the middle of the clearing smoke, he saw the form of the Arbalest still intact. It was standing with its arms crossed against its chest, but there wasn’t one scratch on the armor anywhere.

Ordinarily, a direct hit from a missile should have partially destroyed it.

“...there’s no problem,” Sousuke said.

The missile’s explosion had been entirely stopped and dispersed by the invisible wall that had been created in front of the Arbalest.

“This is Uruz 2, what just happened!? Report the situation!”
Mao said in a tense voice.

“This is Uruz 7. We were attacked by a surviving enemy’s missile, but Uruz 6 took care of it. No damages to our side.”

There was a small sigh of relief over the radio.

“Uruz 2, roger... be careful, okay?”

The communication ended, and Sousuke had the Arbalest stand up. Kurz’s M9 was just staring at him and the Arbalest.

“Sousuke. Just now, are you...”

“Yes. Are you okay?”

“I think... I saw it. Was that it?” Kurz answered, confused about the machinery he was not used to using.

“Al. It was operating, wasn’t it?”

<Affirmative. No structural damage detected. Main condenser output stable.>

“Good. Then go ahead and store all of the data from the previous 120 seconds uncompressed into file Zulu-1.”

<Roger.>

He felt like he had grown to understand the trick to it.

Sousuke and the Arbalest were getting used to handling the Lambda driver.

“But, that was really surprising,” Kurz said in admiration, “seeing it from so close. A direct hit from an anti-tank missile? And so easily, too? That’s some frightening equipment.”

“The first time I saw the ECS invisibility mode, I thought so, too,” Sousuke said. “It doesn’t require deep thought. This kind of thing may even become natural, eventually.”

“Well... that might be true, I guess,” Kurz said over the radio with some discretion in his voice. “But if we do that, I have a feeling we will be forgetting something important, if we were to think ‘it’s natural’, no matter what kind of outrageous equipment

we have. The machines that we pilot... even these ASes, there's some kind of malaise in them."

"...?"

"No, I'm just babbling. Anyway—" Kurz said, changing the tone of his voice, "This is Uruz 6. They said that we still haven't found the commander of this base. So let's hurry up and find him so we can interrogate him. I wanna go home and get some sleep already."

"This is Uruz 9... umm, according the prisoners, the commander—" Corporal Yang, who was standing in front of the group of prisoners, said over the radio. The prisoners were exchanging glances and pointing in the direction from which the missile had come.

"What is it? Hurry up and tell us already."

"The commander- was the person who shot that missile, who Kurz just blew to pieces with his machine gun."

"Eh? ...ah... is that right," Kurz said in a wretched voice. Just then Mao's voice broke in.

"What did you say? Blew to pieces? You killed him!? Why didn't you use the taser!?"

"How could I have known!? It was all so sudden!"

"Shut up! We were told to bring the commander in alive, and you go and do this! This was my debut fight as a second Lieutenant!"

"B-be quiet! He was a bastard who killed god knows how many innocent sailors, wasn't he!? He went fishing with 50 caliber bullets!"

"That's not the problem, is it!? Are you suggesting we interrogate a corpse!?"

"He shot Sousuke, didn't he!?"

"Huh!? Then Sousuke, how are you doing??"

“No problems here.”

“Ah, you bastard...”

“See!? It’s your fault, isn’t it!? ‘Cause that’s what I’m going to detail in my report! Ah, dammit, when we get back Ben’s going to rag me about this for sure. With you giving me such problems, there’s no meaning in becoming an officer! It’s settled, then- next time you’re buying me a drink! I swear, when it comes to you, there’s an incurable, simplistic, single-minded-”

“Shut up! Now you’re just rattling on, you know! Just last week in practice you blew a car filled with hostages away with 40mm shells! That’s-”

“Yeah, yeah, excuse me! That was practice! This is the real thing!”

Sousuke, fed up with the two arguing back and forth, interrupted the heated exchange.

“Both of you. Move past who’s to blame- I want to get ready to leave. If I go back now, I can still make it in time for my Classical Literature make-up exam. Mr. Fujisaki is strict. At this rate, my credits will-”

“Quiet! Part-timers should keep their mouths shut!” both Kurz and Mao yelled over the radio at the same time.

“...”

<I agree, Sergeant. In this situation, it is prudent to maintain silence.>

“Al, you bastard-”

<Excuse me. I will be quiet.>

I should go ahead and destroy this AI, Sousuke thought seriously just then.



December 21st, 03:51 (Local Time)
West Pacific Ocean, Depth 250 Meters
Tuatha de Danaan, 1st Briefing Room

“In other words, well...”

It was the end of the debriefing after the pirate base operation. When it came to the part where the Arbalest was hit by the missile, Melissa Mao evaded the explanation.

“In that moment, both a good thing and a bad thing... happened at the same time.”

“Well, then, will you tell me the good thing first?” asked the leader of the SRT ground unit, Belfangan Clouseau, as he listened to the sullen story. He was a tall, black man, around age 30, with sharp eyebrows. He was wearing field clothes and a fearless expression.

Mao spoke.

“The Arbalest used the Lambda Driver and stopped the explosion from the anti-tank missile. He also collected a lot of data.”

“That’s the most important thing, then. Even though it was accidental, good job, Sagara... however, deal with attacks ahead of time from now on. It’s an unnecessary risk.”

Sousuke, dressed in field clothes and sitting in a chair, nodded silently.

“And? What’s the bad thing?”

“The commander of the pirates who shot the missile was blown away by Kurz. He used the 12.7mm machine gun on the head, and- well,” Mao looked down at the clipboard in her hands, “he used 54 rounds, so there’s nothing left.”

“Ahh...”

He didn't seem surprised since it had been a possibility- but even so, Clouseau closed his eyes, his temples twitching.

"Wonderful. Well then, how do we interrogate the commander who was blown away into nothing? Please tell me, Weber."

"Ha ha ha. That's impossible. We'll have to ask a psychic from Mount Osore^{*4}. But we'll need one who can speak Chinese," Kurz Weber, who was sitting in the seat next to Sousuke, replied sarcastically with a dry laugh.

"I was just kidding, Sergeant..."

"I know, Lieutenant."

Clouseau and Kurz exchanged threatening glances, and from beside them Mao let out a small sigh.

These two hadn't gotten along at all, not since their terrible first meeting. These two had been in several combat situations together, but it was a miracle that Kurz had not "accidentally" shot Clouseau in the back.

"Umm, excuse me," Yang Jun-Kyu said reservedly, holding up his hand, "but I don't think there was any other choice at that time. From the position of Kurz's M9, a taser would not have been effective because the range just above him was thick with smoke. There was also no guarantee that the enemy had not prepared a second shot, so quickly rendering the subject powerless was the only alternative."

Yang was the one who did the follow-up in these situations.

"...anyone else have an opinion?" Clouseau said, looking around at the others in the room. Although everyone, including Mao and Sousuke, was passive, they nodded their heads in agreement. Clouseau finally accepted the judgment of his subordinates.

“Very well. In that case, it was unavoidable. I will report it to the Lieutenant Commander. That pirate hideout probably has no connection with Amalgam. That means we’ve lost another possibility. We’re now at a total loss as to where the bases of their colleagues are or even the true character of their organization.”

“What about the results from the analyses of Venom and Behemoth?” Mao asked.

Mithril had recovered the wreckage of what could be called numerous “Amalgam-made” enemy ASes from the battles so far. It had almost been six months since they recovered “Behemoth”. If the Department of Research and the Department of Intelligence would do some serious analysis, they would be able to identify some of the companies that were connected with manufacturing the parts.

“It seems the important parts are mostly ‘Source Unknown’. The electrical components are Western or Japanese-made and could be from anywhere.”

“You’re kidding me. They should be able to pinpoint factories that can make that degree of specialty parts.”

“If it’s a Western factory, yes. They let us analyze their design habits, common features and such- but when it comes to Venom, there’s a strong opinion that it’s a prototype of a Soviet-made next generation model AS.”

“You mean the one called Shadow?”

The Zy-98 Shadow. The code name of the next powerhouse AS to replace the Rk-92 which was currently in development by the Zeya Department of Planning.

The existence of this new-type AS had been made known to those with military connections in the West only one month ago. Even Mithril did not have all the particulars, but it was said that they had succeeded in creating perfect electrical propulsion due to

a small-size, high-power palladium reactor like that of the M9. Not only that, but it was said to actually surpass the specifications of the M9, as well.

The Venom was said to be an adaptation of the Shadow.

“We still aren’t out of the guessing stage, though. Speaking from the standpoint of the structure of the machines, it looks like there’s a connection between Zeya’s new AS and the Venom and our M9s and the Arbalest. Anyway, we’ll pay attention to the keyword ‘Badham’ that Sagara heard. But then again, Gauron may have misled us to screw with us.”

“Lieutenant. There is no mistake that that word was some kind of hint,” Sousuke said.

Clouseau’s surmise could very well be correct, but for some reason, Sousuke couldn’t believe that the word Gauron told him in Hong Kong was just nonsense.

“I understand. Or it could be a trap... either way, the plan is to be on guard... but for now our job isn’t information analysis, it’s extermination of pests. From now on any mission where there’s the potential to gather information about the Venom-type AS, even if it’s only a little bit, will be carried out perfectly. Lieutenant Commander Kalinin is of the same opinion on this. Remember that.”

Everyone present each gave replies of “understood” or “yeah, yeah”.

“Well then, you each have until seven o’clock tomorrow morning to file your reports. I will need three people to guard the pirates- Weber, I’m recruiting you.”

“Eeh!? Why do I have to-”

“That’s an order. Take charge, choose some guards from the PRT personnel, and give them directions. Got it? Everything is your responsibility. I don’t want a repeat of the Perio Islands.”

“...understood,” Kurz answered in a more respectable voice when he thought of the death of McAllen, Clouseau’s predecessor.

“Then you’re all dismissed. Good job today.”

Everyone stood up and left the briefing room, talking about various topics.

“What is it?” Clouseau said to Mao, who had stayed behind.

“Why did you make Kurz do it? If it’s guard duty, I could have done it.”

“He needs some experience doing some officer duties. It’ll make him learn some responsibility.”

“Ah, so that’s it,” Mao nodded in comprehension.

“That’s not the only thing, though. I’ve talked with Lieutenant Commander Kalinin and Captain Testarossa. You’re a Second Lieutenant... now we need to promote someone to sergeant major of the SRT unit. Those who we could promote are Sagara, Sandarapta, and Weber. But since Sagara is too young, and he’s only part time, and Sandrapta isn’t suitable for command, and also-”

“And also?”

“According to that girl, Kaname Chidori, during the Perio Islands incident, when McAllen turned to Guen for the last time, he told him ‘Get Weber and the others’. The Lieutenant Commander was gone and you were injured. So the name he gave him was Weber’s. The Captain was also watching over him, wasn’t he?”

“...”

“He’s a disagreeable man, but he has character. He puts his colleagues first. I want to put him through the ringer for a while, and see what we get.”

“Hmmm...”

When he noticed Mao smiling, Clouseau raised his eyebrow.

“What?”

When it was just the two of them, Clouseau quickly reverted back to the way he was in the old days when they were both non-commissioned officers.

“Nothing. I just think I see it when I look.”

“Don’t tease me. The Lieutenant Commander is apt to leave. Then there won’t be anyone here but me.”

“That’s true. We’re counting on you, Ben.”

“For heaven’s sake...”

With a sullen look on his face and his briefcase under his arm, Clouseau walked out of the room.

When he returned to the SRT-use standby room, Sousuke booted up his laptop computer and started writing his report.

Kurz grumbled and complained, but nevertheless went to take over guard of the prisoners. After that, the room was quiet. If he hurried and finished up the paperwork, Sousuke might be able to get a helicopter ride to Tokyo after the submarine surfaced.

There were some of the crew who felt that a non-commissioned officer such as Sousuke shouldn’t receive such special treatment, but it wasn’t his concern. He was in danger of failing.

“Transportation accommodation will be provided if possible,” was firmly stated in his new contract (he had to pay for the price of fuel, though).

“Where are you going?” he heard Mao, who was typing on a similar type of laptop, ask as he stood up.

“To get some food.”

“Ahh... I see. Well, take care, then.”

“See you later.”

Just before he left the room, he watched Mao excitedly pick up the ship’s internal telephone, but he wasn’t especially interested in what she was doing.

He climbed up the nearby stairs, and walked leisurely down the passageway.

When he reached the second signboard he unexpectedly ran into the Captain, Tessa, in a corner with no one else around.

“Ah... Mr. Sagara,” Tessa- Teletha Testarossa said.

She was a thin, diminutive girl with braided ash-blonde hair, who was the same age as Sousuke. Her captain’s insignia gleamed on the shoulder of her khaki-colored uniform. For some reason, she was out of breath.

“Captain.”

Before, Sousuke’s back would have straightened up and he would have given her a conscientious salute- however, he had since learned that she hated that kind of behavior. She let him just give her a light nod.

“Are you taking a break?”

“Yes, since the ship is only cruising for now. I’m a little hungry, so I left the rest to Mr. Mardukas.”

She then continued, looking up at him, “Would you like to eat together?”

“In the cafeteria?”

“Yes. If it’s alright with you, would you accompany me?”

“Yes ma’am, since I was headed that way already.”

The two of them walked along together. The cafeteria had closed not long before they arrived. There was no one else around since it was past midnight, nor did there seem to be any food left, either.

“You sit over there. I’ll make us something,” Tessa said one-sidedly, and went into the kitchen. Sousuke started to panic.

“Captain, this is a problem. I should be the one doing such a-” he started to say, but stopped when he saw Tessa staring accusingly his way.

“Can you not eat my food?”

“No, that’s not what I-”

“Even though you always eat the food Kaname makes.”

“...”

When she saw him at a loss for words, Tessa giggled.

“It’s okay. Why don’t you try my cooking out for a change?”

“Understood. I will let you treat me, then.”

Before, he would have awkwardly tensed up and said something like, “I’ll do it myself,” or “How can I help?” but-

Well, it’s okay.

Sousuke thought better of it and sat down in one of the cafeteria chairs.

“I heard that you had a tough time on Badamu Island,” Tessa said from inside the kitchen. He could hear the sounds of her opening and closing the refrigerator door and shuffling cooking implements around.

“No ma’am. It was an easy mission.”

“But you had to use the Lambda Driver, right?”

“I apologize. If I had not have been careless, I wouldn’t have had to use it.”

“Everything turned out alright, though. It looks like you are getting used to the Arbalest.”

“Yes ma’am. But I am annoyed by Al’s nonsense. It goes on talking about unnecessary things one right after another- I’ve never heard of an operating system like that.”

“It’s not an operating system.”

“Ma’am?”

“I’ve told you before, right? The Arbalest is your alter ego. For example- if you had grown up under different circumstances, you might have been like Al.”

“Please don’t say such a thing,” he said with a grimace, and the sound of a knife hitting against the cutting board suddenly stopped.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said in a surprised voice.

When he suddenly realized that he had carelessly been rude to her, Sousuke started to apologize.

“I’m sorry. I was just—”

“It’s okay. You were acting like you were talking to Melissa or Weber just now.”

“I was?”

“Yes. I’m a little glad... fu fu.”

“It... feels a little odd.”

“I think so, too. A strange feeling,” Tessa said excitedly.

Tessa continued cooking for a little while. He could hear her stirring something up in a bowl, the sound of water boiling in a pot, and the sound of something frying in a pan.

It had taken him six months to be able to talk to her honestly like this; and right now, Sousuke was feeling an indescribable affection towards Tessa, whom he once thought of as a goddess.

He thought she was a fascinating young lady. He was happy that she would talk to him like this. Watching her cooking with her head bent down like that, he got the same feeling as when Kaname was doing the same thing.

“It’s finished.”

Tessa came out of the kitchen carrying a large plate of pasta.

“It’s Carbonara Spaghetti. I make it for myself a lot after work.”

Using a fork and spoon, she put some on a small plate. A little bit of steam was rising up from it. It was covered in cheese and cream sauce, and smelled of fragrant black pepper and garlic.

“It’s really easy to make. I at least have more confidence making this than Mr. Kalinin’s borsch. So don’t worry.”

“That’s best, then,” he said bluntly, and put some of the pasta in his mouth. At once, both of his eyes went wide. Indeed, it was-

“Delicious.”

For some reason, when he said that, Tessa’s body shrugged up very primly, and she made a V-sign with her fingers.

“Yes... the crash course worked. With this, Miss Kaname’s underhanded tricks are...” Tessa mumbled from out of nowhere to no one, and Sousuke gave her a perplexed look.

“Ma’am?”

“Nothing, I was just talking to myself. Please, continue eating!”

“Okay...”

Being driven by hunger, Sousuke quickly ate his pasta while doubtfully pondering over what she had just said. Tessa absentmindedly watched him as he lifted his fork from the plate to his mouth and down again.

“Mr. Sagara, do you want seconds?” she asked.

“Yes, please.”

Sousuke, who was in the habit of normally only eating until he was half-full, quickly handed over his plate. If this were before a mission, he would have refused since gluttony was prohibited. Being over-full clouded one’s ability to think, and in the off-chance that he or she were shot in the stomach, the probably of death increased dramatically. But he was on the ship right now, so he didn’t have to worry about having to confront something like

that. That was as long as Kurz didn't screw up while guarding the prisoners.



“Is it good?” Tessa asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

“Good!” she said with a grin. You could almost say her smiling face was glowing. Sousuke felt at ease, yet at the same time, a little guilty.

“So... next week is Christmas, right?” she said a little hesitantly.

“I don’t know the details, but it seems that way.”

“Do you know what the 24th is?”

“I’ve heard that it’s some event called ‘Christmas Eve’.”

Of course, even Sousuke knew that Christmas was a Christian holiday. For Sousuke, who fought alongside the Mujahideen (Islamic Holy Warriors) in Afghanistan, it wasn’t something which held much interest for him. He, on the other hand, was more worried about Ramadan, which would start three days before Christmas Eve this year.

Christmas was a time when the Soviet soldiers, who were his enemies during his time in Afghanistan, would let down their guard... that was how Sousuke thought of it.

Why is she bringing up Christmas all of the sudden...?

Sousuke unconsciously stiffened up. Tessa was supposedly a Catholic. He didn’t think that she would start a strange religious fight, but he became uneasy.

“I see... so you don’t know...”

“Ma’am?”

“It’s nothing. Anyway, Mr. Sagara...” Tessa continued, her voice faltering.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Actually, on the 24th... there’s a party planned for all of the troops, right? Afterwards, Melissa and the others are planning on having another small party in my quarters or some other place. I

was wondering, if you don't already have plans, would you like to come?"

She looked at Sousuke with completely innocent eyes.

"The 24th?"

"Yes."

"..."

Sousuke didn't know what to do. That was the day of the special field trip at school.

He had already told them, "I will make arrangements for perfect protection," among other things.

However, there weren't many chances to deepen his relationship with the busy Tessa. Sousuke had vaguely been considering her kindness for the past several months. Even though such a person was inviting him like this, he was extremely hesitant to turn her down cold.

"...I guess you're busy with school, huh?"

"No, that's not it. I'm just a little..."

As he was trying to come up with a response, he heard the sound of running in the passageway outside of the cafeteria.

"Hey, hey!"

Mao flew into the room, running excitedly. A moment ago, she had supposedly been using her computer to look something up, when-

"What is it, Mao?"

"Sousuke! You know Persian, right?"

"A little in the Afghan dialect. What about it?" Sousuke asked without having a clue as to what she was talking about.

Mao answered in a loud voice, "Then why didn't you notice!? ...geez!"

"Huh?"

“About ‘Badham’. I’ve been looking it up. From what we know about Gauron’s history, I checked the languages he might know... and in Persian, ‘Badham’- when you write ‘Badame’ in that alphabet, you know what you get?”

“That’s... almond.”

“No, that’s ‘Badam’. If you add an ‘e’ to that?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted a little embarrassed. When he was in Afghanistan, he spoke Turkish and Farsi- the Afghani dialect of Persian, all the time. He could also use Pakistani Pashto for everyday conversation. Afghanistan was a country made up of a complex mix of people.

It wasn’t because Sousuke had a special linguistic talent that he knew so many languages. He simply just remembered using them as long as he could remember when he lived in those areas.

However, his Farsi had become rather rusty, and he never learned to read or write it in the first place. He only knew English and Japanese characters- and a little bit of Russian.

“So if you add an ‘e’, what is ‘Badame’?” Sousuke asked, puzzled. Even Tessa, who could speak nearly ten languages fluently but didn’t know Persian, looked blankly. She also appeared to upset by Mao’s interruption.

“‘Pupa’. It means ‘pupa’!”

“Eh?”



December 21st, 15:37 (Japan Standard Time)
Choufu-shi, Tokyo, Japan
Jindai High School

“Hey, Sagara,” his classmate Kyouko Tokiwa said as she approached Sousuke after school. “Did you know that the 24th is Kaname’s birthday?”

“...”

“Hello? Heey.”

“Now...that you mention it, I... do,” Sousuke said jerkily.

Since he wasn’t acquainted with the customs for birthdays and such, Sousuke had actually completely forgotten about Kaname’s birthday. But he had looked over all of Kaname’s information before he started coming to this school...

However, he had things to do for Mithril on that day.

There was a look of pain on Sousuke’s face for making such an oversight, which Kyouko ignored as she continued.

“You’re going on the cruise, right? So, I was planning on surprising Kaname on that day. You know, have everyone yell ‘Happy Birthday!’”

She glanced at the form of Kaname, who was leaning out of the window and having a fight with blackboard erasers.

“You see, I don’t think she’s expecting something like that this year, so I want to take advantage of that. We’re talking about having everyone buy her a bouquet of flowers, so would you contribute to the collection?”

“Collection?”

“You don’t know? ...let’s see, a collection is when everyone gives some money. 300 yen a piece. Please?!”

“I see. I’ll contribute, then. However-”

“However?”

Grabbing his wallet, Sousuke stammered.

“I’m sorry, but I wasn’t planning on going on the cruise. I have other business.”

“You’re not coming? Weren’t you excited about it the other day!? You said ‘I will be completely armed and ready,’ or something like that.”

“Umm... no. That’s...” Sousuke mumbled incoherently.

“And what about Kaname’s birthday?”

“I’m sorry, but I have a previous engagement.”

“Eh? Kaname’s gonna be disappointed, you know.”

“It can’t be helped.”

“What kind of business is it?”

However, a student from Jindai High School couldn’t know about the existence of Mithril. Of course, that went for Kyouko, as well.

“I can’t say. I’m sorry...”

Just then, Kaname aimlessly got closer to them. While she was putting the erasers back on the chalkboard and arranging the chalk, she asked them, “What?”

“Huh? No... it’s nothing. Ah hah hah.”

“Huh? What’s going on?”

“A... anyway, get this, Kaname! Sagara said he’s not coming on the cruise! Doesn’t that suck?” Kyouko said with a clenched fist, changing the topic. As she did, Kaname suddenly stopped lining up the chalk with her hand for a just a moment.

“Oh, is that so...” she said curtly.

“I have a lot of things I have to do. Sorry.”

“Hmm... so what are you apologizing to me for?”

“Huh? No, I was-”

“It’s okay, isn’t it? At least that way it’ll be quiet. I don’t know what kind of mission or whatever you have going on, but I hope you have a fun Christmas, ‘cause I don’t care one bit.”

“No, it’s just that day is-”

“What’s that day?”

Looking to the side, Sousuke faltered. Since Kyouko was right next to him, he was hesitant to refer to Mithril.

“Heh, it’s something so important that you can’t explain. Well... it has nothing to do with me. See ya. Don’t expect a souvenir,” she said in a somewhat cold voice and quickly left the room.

Kyouko, who had been watching the exchange from the side, sighed deeply.

“See there!? She’s getting really upset now!”

“I... it looks that way,” Sousuke said with sweat on his forehead. “But I don’t understand it. Why did she get so mad about it?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s her birthday, right? She’ll be disappointed if you don’t come. Since Kaname is so stubborn, she can’t say that she’ll be ‘lonely’. You should be able to tell that at least.”

Kyouko’s words were logical, but even so, Sousuke still had a hard time understanding their meaning.

“I don’t understand. Are birthdays so important?”

“Whatever! Just pound it into your head!”

“...roger,” Sousuke said for the time being. “But still, I’m sorry. There’s no way I can make time on that day.”

Kyouko’s pigtails dangled coquettishly.

“I see... is it a party somewhere?”

“A party. That’s it. That kind of meaning. The plans for the party became another party.”

“Huh?”

“No, don’t worry about it.”

After school, Kaname headed to the Sengawa Station shopping district by herself.

She went into a fancy shop that had cute stuffed dolls and other stuff lined up in a row looking for a stuffed Bonta-kun, when the business-looking man beside her approached.

“Miss, would you like to go somewhere with me?” he said in a somewhat clumsy voice.

“I said come the day before yesterday, Barlow.”

“You say that, but... I’ll treat you to something nice.”

He also said this in a reluctant voice. When she heard these words, she snorted a little.

“Very well. It looks like you remember the password perfectly.”

“Can’t we pick a better phrase and location...?” the man said in a lower voice.

“That was unnatural. If they knew about this kind of communication, what would your superiors at the Intelligence Department say...?”

“You can be quiet now.”

Kaname gave him a side-glance.

This man was an agent in Mithril’s Information Bureau. His code name was ‘Wraith’. His mission was observing and guarding Kaname (although the guard part was doubtful).

He was like a master of disguise who had a different form whenever he came out. Sometimes he was an elegant old woman, sometimes he was an irresponsible young man. He’d also been a middle-aged businessman, a 40-something year old housewife, a construction worker, insurance salesman, and many, many other variations. Kaname didn’t even know whether or not this agent was even a man.

Kaname deeply admired Wraith’s ability to disguise himself. He was even able to freely change the tone of his voice.

“But you know... you are clever at disguising yourself. Wouldn’t it be more profitable to quit a job where you have to wear a tie such as a spy and become an actor instead?”

“Mind your own business.”

Wraith became insistent and squared his shoulders.

“Ah, I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

He might have wanted to become an actor a long time ago. But he probably got caught up in the raging sea that is reality, his dreams destroyed, until he was carried along and until he then ruined himself by becoming a spy for a suspicious organization. This is what Kaname imagined, and without realizing it, she was looking at him with sympathy in her eyes.

“If I said something insensitive, I apologize. That wasn’t my intention...”

“...what, are you imagining something really rude?”

“No. Humans just have to go through a lot in order to live. So cheer up.”

“That’s a strange way to lie...”

“But even this kind of job could make you a really good actor, too.”

“That’s why I have no interest in acting...!”

This was the state of Kaname and Wraith’s relationship recently. Somehow, she had a talent for upsetting the pace of all kinds of people like mercenaries or spies.

When she had something she wanted to know, or just some free time on her hands, Kaname would often call Wraith. Naturally, he and Sousuke had never had met in person. Due to Wraith’s obstinate claims, it was decided that she was not to call him when Sousuke was with her. Kaname could vaguely guess from the way each of them spoke that Wraith, who was from the Intelligence

Department, and Sousuke, who was from the Operations Department, did not get along at all.

“So, did you look into it?” Kaname said, getting down to business.

“...more or less. But since it’s the Department of Operation’s plans, I can’t be positive. Concerning the squadron of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, there are no plans for any special military operations around Christmas. It seems they are planning a banquet, though.”

“Hmmm... I see,” Kaname’s face fell all of the sudden.

She had thought that Sousuke wasn’t coming on the cruise because he had a mission for Mithril.

But it seemed that wasn’t it.

He cancelled going on the special field trip to go to his squadron’s party or something, since there he had friends whom he trusted with his life- as well as that girl.

She wished she had confronted Sousuke directly about it- but when she got nervous about having that kind of relationship, she couldn’t bring herself to ask.

“What kind of party is it, I wonder...”

“Like I would know. Are you worried about the field trip?”

“You checked that out, too, right?”

“I did. According to our analysis, there doesn’t seem to be any problems with the ship. Its background check also came out clean. But there’s no guarantee that an enemy like the ones in Shun On won’t get their hands on it.”

“You mean a sea-jacking?”

“Yes. However, the possibility of that happening is extremely low. Even enemy organizations realize the awesome mobility, power and strength of the TDD’s squadron. They

probably wouldn't use such a strategy in order to kidnap you. However, that alone is..."

Wraith hesitated.

"That alone is... what?"

"Nothing. I just meant that the danger of you getting attacked any other day is higher."

"..."

"But no enemies will come. They should just let you move around freely and watch you. If they get worried, they might have the confidence to get rid of either me or Uruz 7 and take you away."

"...you're pretty calm about it."

"I'm only stating the truth."

"But aren't you guys just letting me move around at will, too?"

"..."

Wraith always clammed up whenever she touched upon this subject.

Trying to suppress her feelings of anxiety, Kaname's voice became sharp.

"If you ask me, you people at the Intelligence Department and the 'enemy' both smell fishy to me. Setting aside Sousuke and Tessa, I don't get what the higher-ups at the Operations Department are thinking, either."

"I can understand your misgivings but, Kaname Chidori, I want you to accept my sincerity just a little. If they discovered that I was contacting you in person, I would be in a lot of trouble with my superiors."

"Thank you for that. Come to my place next time, and I'll make you something to show my appreciation. What kind of dishes do you like?"

“I really like Chige-nabe^{*5} ...no, no I don’t! Did you really get what I was talking about just now!?”

“Yes, yes. Don’t call you out whenever, right? I get it.”

“For heaven’s sake...” Wraith sighed. He turned his back to Kaname and started to leave, but then he stopped and said, “Anyway, be careful on the trip. I’ll be undercover as one of the guests to make sure.”

“I see. Keep up the good work.”

She wondered what he would be disguised as.

Kaname watched Wraith’s back as he left the shop.

She imagined a cruise without Sousuke.

Mithril is more important, she thought. Feeling depressed and without buying anything, Kaname left the store.

Outside the air was cold, and she could see her breath.

It was the season where the sun only shone for a short part of the day; but even though the sky was pitch black, the shopping district was very alive. Christmas songs were playing, people were talking, and the sound of laughter could be heard everywhere.

“...a-”

Standing in front of an old shoe store diagonal from the shop Kaname came out of was Sousuke.

Crossing through the hustle and bustle, he made his way towards Kaname. Before she wondered if he had seen her meeting with Wraith, she hoped he might have come to say “I’ve decided to go on the cruise”.

But despite those feelings, she ended up saying “What are you doing here?” in a curt voice.

“I was waiting for you to come out. I saw a suspicious man go in and come out of the store, but- I guess nothing happened,” Sousuke replied.

“N-not like something would. So put the gun away already.”

“Mmm...”

Sousuke then put the automatic pistol he was hiding behind his briefcase back in the holster under his jacket.

It seemed that Sousuke hadn’t noticed Wraith after all. Or he might have some suspicion.

Of course, that didn’t make Sousuke an idiot. Wraith’s skills at disguise were top notch. Kaname kept arguing him down lately, but it seemed that he was an excellent agent. If he slipped into a crowd of people, Wraith truly became an “invisible” presence. It seemed that even Sousuke, who was well attuned for sensing murderous intent, didn’t pick up on anything coming from him.

Kaname walked along with Sousuke following behind her.
“Chidori.”

“What?”

“You’re not hiding something from me, are you?”

“Huh...?”

“Ever since we came back from Hong Kong, sometimes it seems you are- no, it’s probably just my imagination.”

It seemed that Sousuke wasn’t sure, but he could somehow feel that there were some things she wasn’t telling him- her meetings with Wraith for the past two months while he was gone- as well as that boy named Leonard.

She was thinking of telling him about Wraith when she got the chance. She had been half-serious in her joke about making dinner. She had the mind to make Wraith and Sousuke sit down together and treat them to dinner. Since Wraith really didn’t seem like such a bad guy, she thought that it would be good to have him reach a compromise with Sousuke.

But she couldn’t tell him about Leonard.

She told him that she had been chased by an assassin over the hotel rooftops, and that another “person” dealt with the assassin. She also told him about the robots she had seen. However, the conversation she had with that “person”, and well as what he did- she just couldn’t bring herself to tell him about those.

So far, Sousuke also had never pursued the subject. But today was the first time he had asked about it. He probably felt some uneasiness because of the near miss with Wraith earlier.

“You think I’m hiding something?”

“No... I wouldn’t go so far as to say ‘hiding’. Is there something bothering you?”

“No. Besides, aren’t you the one hiding something?”

Kaname couldn’t stop the sharpness in her voice.

“Me?”

“About Christmas. Why are you skipping out on the special school trip?”

“There’s an operation.”

Another lie, Kaname thought.

Even though it was just a party for Mithril. Was it so he could make a ruckus with everyone and get friendly with that girl? She hadn’t thought he was the type of man to tell such a lie. She couldn’t remember him pulling such a dirty trick in the eight months since he had come to Japan.

“I see. An operation, huh? Operation, operation, operation... or better yet, why don’t you just get married to ‘Miss Operation’?”

“I don’t really understand what you mean. If there’s something you want to say, could you be a little more specific?”

“Are you serious!?” Kaname said, glaring at Sousuke.
“You’re always, always... if you think you can pull one over on me by pretending to be clueless, you have another thing coming!
Because I’ve got the proof!”

“Huh? I don’t know what you mean... anyway, concerning that subject, there’s something I want to go ahead and tell you-”

“Ah, just shut up! I don’t wanna hear it!”

“Chidori-”

“Don’t hang around me. You’re annoying!”

“I always am! Why are you-”

“I said I didn’t want to talk about it!” she said sharply, and with large strides, Kaname left Sousuke and passed through the crowd.

That night, as usual, Kaname was of course regretting her speech and conduct earlier. However, no matter how many times she tried repeating the exchange over in her head, she couldn’t stop being angry.

Why do I...with that kind of guy- she thought.

From there, her usual thoughts stopped. Normally, she would simply think of his strong points and charms- but they disappeared, and her head filled with negative thoughts.

How come he, without a shred of consideration, makes me feel stupid, and always acts like he’s sincere by acting oblivious? Come to think of it, when you really, really think about it, isn’t lacking that much common sense a little strange? Hasn’t he just pretended to be that kind of character all along? If he has, then he’s just a huge jerk! The worst kind of scumbag! And for just a moment, I felt bad for letting him have it. I’m so glad that I didn’t tell him how I felt. All men are liars, anyway, jerks that’ll tell one lie after another just to preserve their own reputations. You can’t trust them at all, they’re the lowest form of life on Earth.

I definitely, DEFINITELY won’t hang around with a guy. Especially HIM!

Sousuke, I hate you!



For several days following, Kaname barely talked to Sousuke at all. There were many times when Sousuke reluctantly

tried talking to her, but Kaname wouldn't even give him the time of day.

He sent a message to her phone, but she deleted it without even looking at it. When he asked her, "Did you get my message?" at school, she replied, "Yeah, yeah, I got it. So don't talk to me, okay?" and drove him off.

They had fought like this many times before, but-

This time, there ended up being a small mix-up because of it.

Translator's Notes:

1. Due to my total lack of ability to describe this, I've just simplified it for reading. The author says that Kaname used a "ketaguri" move on Sousuke. In the sport of Sumo, ketaguri is a move in which the attacker leaps to the side and sweeps his opponent's lead leg from the inside while slapping the shoulder to pull the arm closest to him.
2. That's 46 miles per hour :)
3. Since we're unsure of Gauron's exact meaning, this could simply just be a word that sounds similar to what Gauron said.
4. Mount Osore is a mountain in Japan believed to be a place where the world of the living meets the world of the dead.
5. Chige-nabe is a Korean dish of hot soup containing boiled vegetables and fish with red pepper and seasoning.

Chapter 2: This Holy Night is Rather Noisy

It was five minutes by bus from the JR Sakuragichou Station. The pier where the *Pacific Chrysalis* was moored was right next to a seaside park covered by couples in the twilight hours.

The *Pacific Chrysalis* was a gigantic cruise ship that was 272 meters in length and weighed over one hundred thousand tons. It was one of the biggest in the world. There were many boats commissioned for the Caribbean Sea that were even bigger than this one; but still, a passenger ship of this size was rare.

It was a snow-white boat with a streamlined funnel and repeated decks of guest rooms.

To be fair, Kaname had been on a gigantic ship before now- Mithril's attack submarine, the *Tuatha de Danaan*- but the *Pacific Chrysalis* seemed to be even larger than that. It looked like an entire city floating on the surface of the ocean.

To Kaname, who only knew about battleships, the *Pacific Chrysalis* looked to be an extremely splendorous boat. Even its interior was far bigger than that of a submarine's. Walking down the passageways or in the guestrooms of the boat gave the same impression as walking through a hotel on the land.

“What a luxurious ship...” Kaname mumbled under her breath as she put her hand luggage on top of the bed in her room.

Kyouko, who was staying in the same room as her, answered in an excited voice, “Isn’t it though!? What about the lobby we passed through when we got on the ship? It was so big and pretty that it took my breath away. We were even received by the Captain of the ship with an orchestra!”

Everyone from school was still getting on board the ship.

Many of the crew who greeted Kaname and the others at the top of the boarding ramp were foreigners. Kyouko and the teachers seemed to be moved by their kindness and courteous attitudes, but Kaname sensed an indescribable artificialness in it all.

The looks on several of the crewmembers' faces seemed to recognize her as she waited in line, their expressions saying "So, this is the girl?" It was like they knew her- no, on the contrary, it was like they knew what her fate was going to be after this- that was the kind of look it was.

The faint expressions stiffened. They looked at each other with knowing looks, then their faces were bright and cheerful again like nothing had happened.

She felt foolish.

Since the incident with the last field trip was famous, and Kaname had been "the girl who was the last one rescued" out of all the students, it wasn't strange that the crew would know about her school.

"Hey, Kaname."

"Hm?"

"Let's go to the upper deck before we take off. I bet we can see the big Ferris wheel in Minato Mirai from the observation deck."

"Okay. But I'm hungry. Do you have any snacks?"

"No, sorry. While we were waiting, Shiori and the others ate them all. I think Mayu had some Pocky^{*1}, wanna ask her?"

"Is that so? Well, she's gained a little weight recently, so I should go confiscate it from her."

"Ooh, that's mean!" Kyouko said. Kaname laughed and left the room.

Many of the female students were wandering around in the brightly lit hallway, talking about this and that in noisy voices.

Ahh, just my luck...

There were also many ordinary guests getting on the ship, as well. Even though they had been severely cautioned not to cause a commotion, the students immediately did so, anyway. If Kaname started doing her duty as the class representative and tried remonstrating them, then-

“You’re kidding me!” a man yelled out.

It was in English. His throaty and overbearing voice drowned out the sounds of the girl students’ laughter.

A large Caucasian man wearing a suit was letting a troubled-looking crewmember have it without any reserve or consideration. Kaname thought he looked a little like Schwarzenegger in some comedy movie she had seen.

“Why do I have the same B-class room as a bunch of stupid little school girls!?”

“I’m very sorry, Sir, but all of the A-class rooms are already full-”

“Then how about you make new arrangements, you intercontinental ballistic idiot! How dare you treat a Commander in the United States Navy such as myself in this way! Are you trying to get on my bad side!? Don’t you guys have connections with the Air Force!?”

“S-sir, please-”

“Cut it out, Captain! This is embarrassing. Isn’t this why your wife left you just before the Japan trip!?”

A handsome young Asian man seeming to be one of his companions held onto the angry Schwarzenegger^{*2}. He was also wearing a similar suit.

“What did you say, Takenaka!? Is an incompetent officer like you ungrateful that you were invited in Eliza’s place!?”

“You think that!? Who do you think it was that forced me here when I was enjoying my holiday in Waikiki!?”

“Hmph, what are you saying? That big-breasted Japanese woman you were messing around with was an STD waiting to happen. You should be thanking me!”

“How can you say such a thing!? ...dammit, why’d you have to go and spoil our last meeting, which I went to a lot of effort to-”

“Shut up! It serves you right!” the man called “Captain” spit out at him. “Even though your superior officer is suffering through the pain of a divorce, you just go around singing about your stupid little vacation! You should suffer, too! Go to hell!”

“That’s all you really wanted, wasn’t it!? Your real motive behind this! Damn it!”

The two men began to grapple with each other in front of the crewmember out in the corridor. Other members of the crew came running to help out, broke the two apart while trying to calm them down, then took them back into their room.

The door closed, and the corridor was quiet.

The students, who didn’t understand English, just stared blankly. On the other hand, Kaname, who had lived abroad, understood the conversation beginning to end, but “*Seems all kinds of people are riding this thing, aren’t they...*” was the only thing she mumbled, and hurried to her classmate’s room.



December 24th, 18:55 (Japan Standard Time)
The Pacific Ocean, Off the Coast of the Miura Peninsula, The Pacific Chrysalis

Before long, the cruise ship departed, and making its way through the Uraga Channel, left Tokyo Bay.

The sun was already setting, but the enormous white ship quietly continued along its course under an entire sky full of stars.

The cold air felt good. The crashing waves sparkled, and many merchant ships and fishing boats passed by. In order to get a glimpse of the refreshing scenery, the students gathered on the quarterdeck for a good view, innocently having fun.

“Wow, it’s so pretty...” Kyouko said as she leaned against the railing and restlessly released the shutter on her digital camera. “What a waste, huh? It would have been nice if Sagara could have come, too.”

“Why are you bringing him up?” Kaname said in a sour voice. Kyouko smiled bitterly at this common response.

“Aaah, it’s always like this. But, where is he really?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where is Sagara? Couldn’t he have just said where he was going? He didn’t tell anyone.”

When Kyouko spoke seriously like this, Kaname was weak. However, when it came to her best friend Kyouko, Kaname couldn’t deal with her cruelly.

“Huh? But, well, umm...”

“Tell me. Come on, come on,” Kyouko said, her large eyes sparkling from behind her dragonfly glasses. Kaname took a small sigh, resigned herself, then told her the bottom line.

“It’s not that I hate him. Just- there really isn’t anything.”

“Really?”

“Really. Honestly, there were a lot of times when I wasn’t so sure, but, really, that was it. I mean, you can tell just by looking, right? Even though today’s my birthday... he’s gone to another get-together instead.”

Sousuke had missed this trip just as he had announced. The day before, when his classmates were teasing him by saying “What? And you told us ‘Leave the security to me’”, he replied, “A situation came up and I can’t go” with a deadly serious face.

“In case there is a sea jacking, do not oppose the terrorists. If you stay calm, they will probably not harm you. Got it? Do exactly as they tell you.”

...he told them.

There was a strange hidden meaning behind those words, but from the corner Kaname just gave a look of indifference when she heard them. After all, they were still fighting.

“Normally he would have come. If he was serious, he would be here.”

“I see... well, that may be.”

“I feel bad for being so stubborn about it, but it’s obvious he doesn’t think that I’m very important.”

“I wonder... I think that it just might be your persecution complex, though.”

“It’s not that. It’s because he has another girl he likes.”

“Huh, really? Who? Do I know her?”

Suddenly Kyouko was very interested.

“Yeah. Remember the girl who was a short-term exchange student at the beginning of second semester-”

“Ah, Tessa, right?”

Actually, everyone in Jindai High knew about Tessa.

Because of the Perio Islands incident at the end of August, the *Tuatha de Danaan* had received some damage and was under repair for weeks. Using that time, Tessa took an extended vacation. And the place where she had chosen to take her holiday was Jindai High School in Tokyo.

It looked like Tessa wanted to try enjoying a normal high school student's life. She and Mao crowded in on Sousuke place, joined the class of 2nd Year, Group 4 in Jindai High under the guise of a short-term study abroad student, stirred Kaname and others' lives up for a full two weeks, then went home. Of course, she hid the fact that Tessa was really was a Captain in Mithril.

"She's in Australia now, isn't she? She still keeps in touch. Then that's the party Sagara was talking about..."

Wraith's information had confirmed it. He was just using a mission as an excuse. Kaname guessed that right about now on Merida Island, a grand party was starting- then sighed. A large group of troops were beginning to drink, sing, and just have a good time; Sousuke and Tessa were probably also getting friendly-

Before she knew it, Kaname had completely reverted back to her bad mood.

"Aaah, I don't wanna talk about it anymore!" she yelled, looking up at the night sky.

"Oh, sorry."

"No, it's okay. Anyway, let's forget about that idiot and have some fun! ...speaking of which, what time is it? I wonder how long it'll be till dinner. I'm really starving."

"Didn't you get a snack?"

"She'd already ate 'em all... hah hah."

Just then, a voice came from behind her.

"Excuse me, Miss Kaname Chidori?"

He was one of the crew, a Caucasian male who looked to be over 40. He was meticulously dressed in a pure white uniform and regulation hat, with a very-well maintained beard. He stood straight and dignified, yet did not give the impression of being overbearing- he was rather like the crew of this wonderful boat, his figure combining both elegance and simplicity.



“Huh? Yes?”

“So it is you. No, even looking at you from a distance, I thought that's got to be her... yes, last but by no means least. I am the Captain of the ship, Steven Harris. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

A sailor who knows how to treat the ladies, she almost said.

Compared to this man, the senior officers on the *de Danaan* seemed very simple. He had almost no accent, and spoke fluent Japanese.

“The Captain?” both Kaname and Kyouko said at the same time. Thinking about it, he was the same person as she had seen in a picture in the brochure they had received before the trip. He also seemed to be in the crew that had welcomed them aboard the ship...

“Umm... it’s a pleasure to meet you, too. But how do you know me?” Kaname asked out of natural confusion.

“Last week, when I met with your teacher, she pointed you out from the pictures we received. See- the picture on your ID card.”

He pointed to the ID card pinned to her school uniform. The students had been given cards which had their names and head shots on them.

“During that hijacking incident, you were the heroine whom everyone was worried about until the very end. I’m quite interested in it.”

“Ah, I see...”

“You’re also a very lovely young lady. It makes me quite happy... oh, and of course your companion is very charming, as well.”

“Thank you. Ha ha ha ha...”

Kaname and Kyouko both smiled insincerely.

“By the way, how are you finding everything on this ship? Do you have any complaints?”

“No, it’s fantastic! It’s very comfortable, big, and it doesn’t rock back and forth at all!”

“That’s good to hear... if you have any problems or requests, please let the nearest person know at anytime. They will

take care of it right away. You are our very important guests, after all. Yes- extremely important guests.”

“...”

Kaname sensed some unnaturalness in these courteous words.

He had a coaxing voice- yes, a coaxing voice.

And his eyes had the look of someone with his prey completely in his hands, and was thinking “*Now then, how shall I cook it?*” Why was she getting that kind of impression?

“Kaname?”

“Hmm?”

“Is something on your mind?”

No. She was just thinking way too much. She was probably just nervous. After thinking better of it, Kaname returned a clumsy smile.

“No, not really. Thank you very much, Captain.”

“Well, take care. And enjoy your stay.”

Captain Harris then left.

“Whew...” Kaname and Kyouko both breathed a sigh of relief when they saw his figure walk off.

“Wow, that was stressful...”

“Yeah. But he was cool, wasn’t he? So strong-looking. But elegant, too. But he really doesn’t seem like a ‘Captain’ at all.”

“Not really. He’s very different from the Captain I know.”

“Hm?”

“Uh, no, I was just talking to myself.”

Just then, they heard a loud noise coming from far off.

When they looked, they could see that Captain Harris, who was going back inside the ship from the observation deck, had been run into by one of the girls in the cabin crew. She had fallen down and overturned a mop and bucket.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

The cabin girl apologized desperately.

Her skirt was fluttering over her black tights, and she was wearing a white apron and hair band. Her ash blond hair was neatly braided, but they couldn’t see her face from where they were.

They also couldn’t hear their conversation because of the distance. It looked like Captain Harris was warning the demure cabin girl from his lively gestures. The girl just kept bowing to Harris over and over again. After that, she picked up the cleaning implements, then hurriedly ran off towards the bow of the ship-and fell down hard again.

“...”

“That’s a very clumsy maid...” Kyouko complained. Next to her, Kaname broke into a cold sweat as her suspicion grew.

It couldn’t be. No... but then again, why would she be on this ship...?

But that was all that they witnessed.

Because it had gotten cold, Kaname and Kyouko went back inside the ship to look around at the facilities.

They caught sight of a young bartender seducing a group of schoolgirls in the corridor in front of the bar lounge. He was a handsome man with blonde hair and blue eyes, his long hair pulled up into a bun, and wearing simple glasses.

They heard the smooth talking man say in fluent Japanese:

“-really, it’s true! I grew up in Edogawa in Tokyo. You know, there’s a great soba^{*3} place there, right? Just give me your telephone numbers. When I have some free time, I’ll give you a call-”

“Ehh, but, hee hee hee...”

“Hey, new guy! No flirting with the guests!”

“Ah... okay, okay”

After being chastised by the veteran crewmember, the playboy returned back to work. Looking at his retreating figure from behind, Kyouko mumbled, “I feel like I’ve seen that guy before somewhere...”

“I-I wonder. Isn’t it just your imagination? There are a lot of foreigners who look like him. Let’s go somewhere else,” Kaname said with the anxiety increasing in her voice.

They walked for a bit, stopping to look into the casino hall. Even though it hadn’t been long since they set sail, the regular passengers who were fond of gambling had already surrounded the roulette wheel.

The dealer was a pretty Asian woman.

She was somewhere in her twenties with short, black hair, and slender features. She was also wearing glasses.

“Now then, place your bets, place your bets! Don’t be so stingy, now- whaaat, this side isn’t set up at all. If you don’t hurry, I’ll have to call all bets off, you know~”

It was a more a world of play gambling than a roulette wheel, but most of the customers pushed their chips out in a business-like fashion with smiles on their faces.

“That person, too... I feel like I’ve met her before...”

“...l-let’s go.”

There was nothing else that Kaname could say.

What in the world was happening on this boat?

Kaname thought that after she parted with Kyouko, she might catch one of them and press them for some answers. No, she absolutely had to. However, after they had left the casino hallway, just as Kaname had resolved herself in her mind, Eri Kagurazaka yelled out to them.

“Hey, you two! Didn’t you hear the announcement?! It’s time for dinner! Jindai High School students are to gather in the great hall!”

When they looked around, all of the students and passengers who should have been here and there were gone.

“Oh, yes Ma’am...”

No helping it, questions will have to come later.

Kaname and Kyouko followed along after Eri and walked to the great hall where supper was being served.



After he had finished greeting Kaname, Captain Harris had walked around the ship for a while, making sure there was nothing abnormal in any of the stations.

It’s only natural. It was his ship, after all. He always paid attention to safety.

If he allowed something to happen on his ship, there would be problems.

Really big problems.

Especially tonight, with such an important event drawing near.

“Captain,” the chief engineer said to Harris as he caught up with him in the passageway. The man was a Columbian who looked to be over forty years old, and had a black mustache.

“Señor, was that the Japanese girl?”

“Yes.”

“When do we take it out of the ‘vault’?”

“Sometime during the night. We’ll pick a time when the brats are asleep.”

“She’ll just obey without a fuss?”

“Of course. All of her school friends are our hostages, anyway.” The edges of Harris’s mouth curled up. “I was thinking that we’ll throw her friend with glasses into the ocean first. That’ll make it easy.”

“The water is freezing cold in December, isn’t it?”

“Their falling off the ship will be an unavoidable tragedy. The whereabouts of Kaname Chidori and her friend will be unknown on this Christmas Eve.”

“What about Mithril?”

“This ship has already set out. They won’t be able to reach us here. This will please Mr. Gold. The organization will reassess my worth.”

Soon it came time to attend the banquet and make his speech. He thought it was an annoying ritual, but it was part of the job.

Harris lightly tightened his necktie, then walked to the great hall.

The great hall where the Jindai High students had gathered was even bigger than their school gymnasium.

In this enormous space there was an array of large tables-and on top of each table was silver dinnerware as well as large portions of food.

It was the format for a buffet party. It seemed that the regular guests were eating in a different hall. Only waiters and those associated with Jindai High School were in here.

The aroma of herbs drifted around the meat dishes. There was pasta made with generous portions of fresh seafood. There was glistening brown turkey barbecue and roast beef. There was lobster cut right in half and cooked in flavorful, rich soup.

And everything was all-you-can-eat.

When it came to eating out, most of the students, who had only eaten hamburgers, beef bowls, ramen or stand-while-you-eat soba, were moved to tears so much that they were speechless.

“Not yet!!” the principal quickly stopped the drooling students as they started to jump on the food. Grabbing a hold of the mike mounted on the stage in the hall, she gained control over the students.

“The Captain of the ship hasn’t made his speech yet! Got it, everyone? You were told this before you got on board, but- as Jindai High students, be sure to conduct yourselves in a manner that won’t bring any embarrassment, okay!? There are regular guests on this ship, too. Also, everyone, please behave modestly so as not to cause any problems. In the first place, right in the middle of the hijacking incident, you guys were acting impudently on the plane, playing card games and fighting amongst yourselves and bothering the flight attendants terribly, all of which was written about in a weekly article afterwards! How come when it comes to the TPO and standards, you guys are-”

Principal Tsuboi continued her sermon for another three minutes.

“-That’s all. Do you understand!?”

The several hundred students replied “Yes Ma’am!” with strange enthusiasm. Their eyes sparkled, seemingly saying, “We get it already, now hurry and let us eat!”

“Very well. Now let’s listen to some words from the Captain of this ship, the *Pacific Chrysalis* - everyone, give him a big hand!”

The bearded Captain quickly made his way on stage. As if he were a rock star or something, the students applauded for him very loudly and blew whistles at him.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of Jindai High School. I’m sorry for making you wait. My name is Steven Harris,” Harris said in front of the mike. The students gave comments of admiration at his fluent Japanese.

“Welcome to the *Pacific Chrysalis*. I could not be more honored that you took us up on our invitation. I have heard about how dreadful your last field trip turned out-” he put in a clever cough, “but don’t worry. There are no terrorists riding on this ship.”

The students burst into laughter.

“That’s true!”

“Way to go, Captain!”

“There’s no way such a thing would happen again, is there!?”

After waiting for everyone to settle back down, Harris continued.

“Thank you very much. However, it is a serious matter. This ship that I run, as well as the smiling faces of our guests, are what I take pride in. A completely safe and pleasant trip. In order to assure those things, I, along with the crew, wholeheartedly... hmm?”

Just then-

A waiter wearing a black vest and butterfly tie blatantly climbed up on stage.

For some reason, the waiter’s head was completely covered by a black mask- he was wearing a balaclava, and in his hand he held a shotgun.

“Eh...?”

As the several hundred students watched closely, the man aimed the shotgun at the ceiling and fired once.

“!”

Harris, the principal and the students all froze at the same time.

“Nobody move!!” the man declared. There was a device on his throat, and his voice was deep and rough. It was tightly connected to the man’s serious-looking mouth, which peeked out from the hole in the balaclava.

“Jindai High second year students! Listen up! We are the treacherous, inhuman organization, ‘The Troubled Revolutionary Group’. This cruise ship, the *Pacific Chrysalis*, which is filled with imperialistic and exploiting societal members, is ours starting now.”

There was a long, long silence.

Then-

“Again!?” a majority of the students cried out at the same time.

At their critical and fed up voices, the masked man calmly replied, “I’m sorry, but yes. We will be commanding this ship from now on...”

The man looked up.

“Yes... our command...”

He looked down beyond the stage as if searching for help.

The bartender had gone up there unnoticed, rifle in hand, and whispered something to the man. There was some blonde hair sticking out from under the edge of his mask.

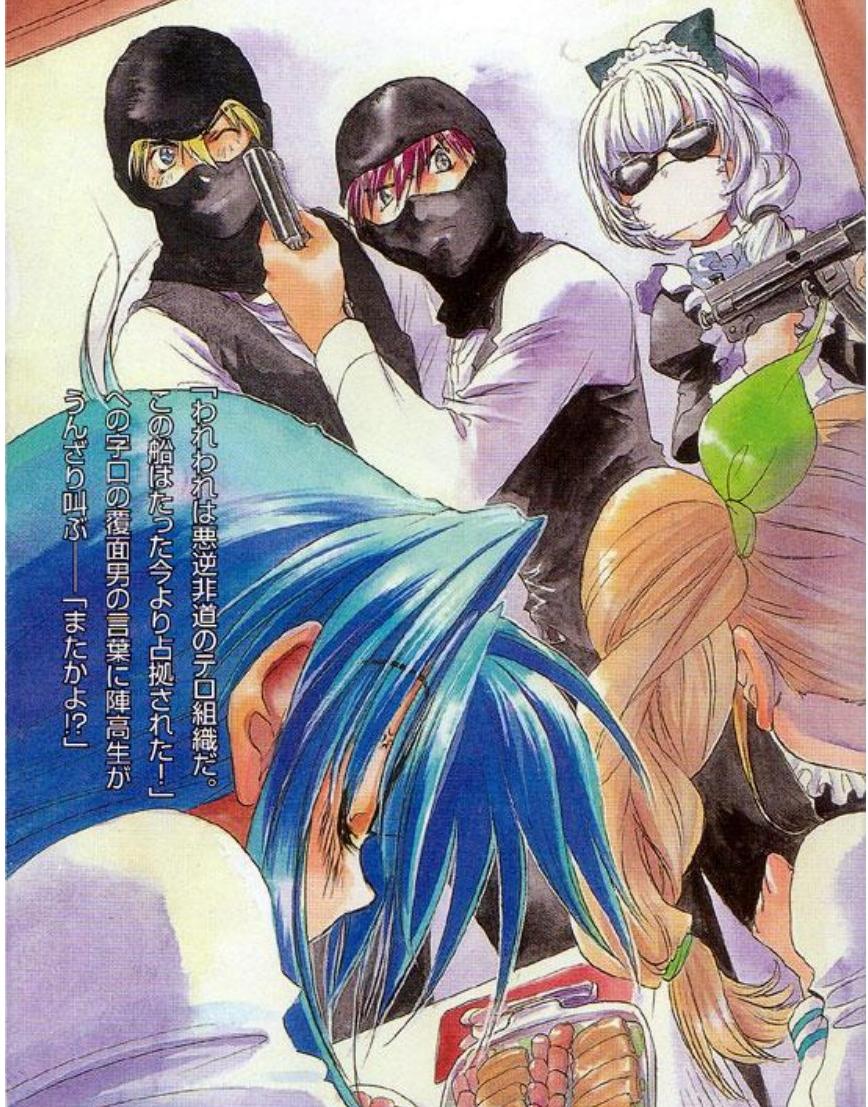
“Mm... I see. Anyway, we, the... umm- ‘Red Army Faction different from the one you know’, now have control of this ship.”

“Isn’t that different from the name he said before...?”

“This is a problem .”

“They don’t even seem to have confidence in themselves.”

フルメタル・パニック!
踊るベリー・メリー・クリスマス



「われわれは悪逆非道のテロ組織だ。
この船はたった今より占拠された!」
への子口の覆面男の言葉に陣高生が
うんざり叫ぶ——「またかよ!」

"We are a treacherous, inhuman terrorist organization. We are taking over this ship starting now!" At the serious-faced masked man's words, the Jindai High School students yell out in a fed up voice, "Again?"

“...anyway, because we are a cruel and unusual terrorist organization, we will not even show mercy to women or children. Resistance means death! Unfortunately, these shotguns are loaded with rubber stun bullets, but they are enough to make someone opposing us cry and beg ‘please stop!’ -”

“No, they’re real bullets!” the blonde masked man cut him off.

“Oh, that’s right. They are brutal slab bullets. It will kill the target in one shot. I am not lying,” he awkwardly corrected himself, then the terrorist pointed to the hall exits.

“Of course, you are forbidden to run away from here. Look!”

The students turned around, and in front of the many doors leading to the kitchen and corridors stood more masked terrorists carrying guns and blocking the way.

Most of them were men dressed like members of the cleaning staff or waiters, but for some reason, there was one small girl among them. She was the maid with ash-blonde hair, and was armed with a submachine gun. She was wearing a scarf around the bottom half of her face and a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses.

“All of them are skilled men who have been forged in a terrorist training camp in Libya. Remember that you will have no chance of winning if you fight them unarmed.”

The terrorists blocking the doors all took one step forward in unison. The masked maid was late, and when she tried to follow suit-

She wasn’t used to wearing high heels, it seemed- she wobbled, then fell down in a very grand fashion.

“Captain...!?” the terrorist on the stage yelled without thinking. The masked maid picked herself up slowly, bravely but

weakly replied, “I’m okay”, then raised her submachine gun. There was an awkward silence.

The terrorist coughed, then continued.

“...anyway, that’s how it is. Now then, Captain Harris, you will come with us. As we are cruel and inhuman terrorists, we have several points to negotiate with you.”

He followed Harris’s blank look. Just then, Kaname Chidori was stomping up the stairs to the stage.

“Stop, woman. Otherwise I’ll shoot.”

The terrorist pointed his gun at Kaname.

She didn’t stop.

“I said stop.”

But she didn’t stop.

“You’ll recklessly throw your life away. If you don’t follow my order, your friends and teachers will be brutally-

“Guh!!”

Kaname’s right hand hit him straight in the gut, and the terrorist was thrown to the floor. The mike fell off below the stage, causing loud feedback over the intercom.

“Now listen up, Sousuke. What in the hell...”

Luckily or unluckily, the mike didn’t pick up her voice.

Kaname violently grabbed the terrorist up by the collar.

“Come on.”

“u... wait, Chidori. In these circumstances-”

“Whatever, just come on.”

“Listen to me.”

“I said ‘Come’, didn’t I!?”

Half dragging the terrorist, Kaname walked down off stage. For some reason, the other terrorists didn’t reproach her for doing so. Rather, they looked somewhat guilty. Because of that, when

Kaname gave an angry look at one of the terrorists guarding the exit, he quickly and quietly gave way.

After the door shut, it was silent for a while.

Then the Jindai High students hummed and whispered among each other.

“Ka-Kaname...”

“She was that brave against the terrorists...”

“What amazing courage.”

“Way to go, Miss Chidori!”

“No, wasn’t she just mad because she’s hungry?”

“But the way those two were acting, it feels like I’ve seen it somewhere before...”

While these conversations were flying around the room, another one of the terrorists went up on stage.

This time it was a tall woman. She was dressed as a casino dealer, and was wearing large sunglasses. She was also wearing a checked-vest with a bowtie and a tight, knee-length skirt. She was carrying a famous German-made submachine gun over her shoulder.

“Ha ha ha. We’re sorry about that. Eh, because of that reason, no one is to leave this area, okay? That girl looked a little feverish, so my friend is *escorting her* to the medical room.”

No matter how you looked at it, it looked like the terrorist was the one being escorted, but the woman was very clear about it.

“Well, since you guys have plenty of hostage experience, I’ll just go over the important points. Just find ways to kill time like you did before. You can go home tomorrow.”

There were whispers from some of the students saying, “*I feel like I’ve heard that voice before...*”

“Eh, let’s see... is there anything you guys want? I’ll listen.”

“Excuse me, but I’m kinda hungry,” one student yelled out quietly.

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry about that, you can eat now. Well, I’ll be back later.”

The students quickly sprang on the mountains of food. The terrorists took the pale-faced Captain with them and got down off the stage.



December 24th, 19:30 (Japan Standard Time)
The Bridge of The Pacific Chrysalis

There were those people who had snuck in as some of the staff, as well as those who had landed on the boat after it set sail in a helicopter hidden by ECS- about 30 members of Mithril in all. They divided up into teams of three to four people each, mobilized, and speedily gained control of the inside of the ship.

The engine room, crew cabins, recreational facilities, communication facilities, air conditioning facilities, and all of the storehouses and food rooms... most of the passengers and crew had quietly followed their instructions when they saw guns pointed at them. The Mithril soldiers counted the number of “hostages” precisely, then reported the information in detail to their commander, Lieutenant Clouseau.

Right now Clouseau was on the bridge of the *Pacific Chrysalis*. Just a few minutes earlier, he and two PRT personnel (Primary Response Team) had broken in here. The navigation officer and helmsmen had surrendered easily when Clouseau and the others threatened them with their rifles (which were loaded with rubber bullets). He didn’t like pretending to threaten innocent

people with guns, but this was part of the job. There was no helping it.

“This is Uruz 8. Area D4 secured with 32 people. No casualties.”

“This is Uruz 5. Area A8 secured with 18 people, no casualties. No resistance.”

“This is Uruz 8. C1 is secured, no people, no casualties. We’re going to continue on to C3.”

No casualties, no casualties, no casualties...

The reports were given, and the PRT soldiers entered the information into the laptops they had brought with them. Most of the crew and passengers were already under their control.

“This is Uruz 9. D13 is secured with 3 people. No casualties. We encountered some resistance.”

When he heard Uruz 9- Corporal Yang’s report, Clouseau said over the radio, “This is Uruz 1 to Uruz 9. Explain what you mean by ‘resistance’.”

“I was hit by an old cleaning woman with a mop. Right now she’s lecturing us.”

“...”

When he listened, Clouseau could hear the remonstrative voice of a middle-aged woman on the other end of the receiver. She was saying things like, “You should be ashamed of yourselves” and “Get real jobs” and such.

Clouseau just closed his eyes as his temples twitched in annoyance.

“We’re terrorists. Don’t let people lecture you.”

“But she’s right. She’s saying that whatever our reasons, threatening people with violence is the lowest form of conduct. She told us to remember the faces of our family at home, Christmas when we were kids, and the hot, home-cooked meals...”

and such. Everyone on my team got misty-eyed, saying things like, ‘Where did we go wrong?’ and such–”

“Don’t start crying about it, that’s just shameful.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. But it’s sad, having to pretend to be terrorists on Christmas... isn’t today supposed to be a day where everyone in the world is happy? I miss my mom’s cheesecake.”

“Get over it and go secure the other areas. Quickly. Understood!?”

“Uruz 9, roger...”

“For the love of...” Clouseau muttered after he ended the communication. “Even with the circumstances as they are, I’ve never heard of this kind of operation before...”

Circumstances.

If not for the word, “Badame”, which Gauron left behind, they probably would have never suspected this giant cruise ship. Actually, even Mithril’s Intelligence Department came to that conclusion in a preliminary test.

But they were wrong.

There was a big secret hidden on this ship. Inviting the Jindai High School students here was a trap devised by either Amalgam or someone working for them. Their squad had taken these actions in order to foil their plans.

This was an almost completely independent operation. Even most of the staff in the Operations Headquarters didn’t know about the *Tuatha de Danaan* occupying this cruise boat. They gave each station in Headquarters different information so that they would be able to ascertain Amalgam’s movements and reveal who their insider was.

They still didn’t know the details about what was hidden on this ship.

That’s what they would be investigating from here.

On top of securing the safety of the students and Kaname Chidori, they were also doing a thorough investigation of the “suspicious sections”. They would counterattack using a method that they enemy wouldn’t expect- if they kept that goal in mind, then this operation was reasonable.

Of course, Clouseau still had his doubts about this plan proposed by Sousuke Sagara and Kurz Weber. He and the second in command of the *de Danaan*, Commander Mardukas, called this sea-jacking “ludicrous” and “haphazard”, and opposed it the entire time. In the end, however, Captain Testarossa and Lieutenant Commander Kalinin let them have their way with “passive approval”.

I'm also a Lieutenant. There are rumors of me being promoted to Captain. I guess I'm going to have to learn about the bureaucrats... he thought.

Naturally, they were always practicing this kind of terrorism suppression training. He was used to playing the bad guy, but-

“But Lieutenant. It's kind of fun being the terrorists for a change. It's perfect for relieving stress,” one of the PRT sergeants said in a lively voice as he pointed his submachine gun at the navigation officer.

“I'll pretend that I didn't hear that remark just now. And use call signs in front of the hostages,” Clouseau said with a cross look on his face. Just then, he received a communication from Mao from the subdued great hall.

“This is Uruz 1.”

“This is Uruz 2. The first hall is secured. There are 324 students and faculty. There are also 28 kitchen cooks and staff altogether. No casualties. For the time being, I've gone ahead and let them continue eating. We've also restrained the other captain.”

“Understood. What about Ansuz?”

“Ansuz” was the call sign of the commander of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, Teletha Testarossa. They used this name when she was outside of the ship during an operation.

“She followed Uruz 7 and Angel out of the hall.”

When he heard this, Clouseau raised his eyebrows.

“Angel left the hall? I thought we had arranged for her to keep quiet with the rest of the students.”

“It’s okay, I’ll call them back soon. What about the other teams?”

“Eight areas complete. No casualties. We just secured the engine room earlier. We also have the communication facilities... it seems that some of the crew are armed. We have encountered some resistance.”

Armed guards wouldn’t be riding on a normal cruise ship. That meant that they were soldiers working for the enemy, and that they were also “protecting something important”.

“I see. So, do we follow the plans for this ship’s Captain?”

“Yes, escort him. Courteously.”



After they had left the dining hall, which had exploded with noise after everyone was permitted to eat, they went to the deserted smoking lounge and-

Kaname changed her attitude, and kicked Sousuke’s butt.

“What are you doing?”

“Shut up!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. “It was fine that you didn’t come on the trip! You could have just done your thing at the party on base! Incidentally, I don’t know what kind of

dirty jobs you guys normally do- but is it normal to attack our own school!?”

“No, we’re not really attacking anyone from school-”

“But you’re really doing it, aren’t you?! Take off that mask, you...”

“...don’t pull so hard, it hurts.”

Kaname yanked the balaclava hat off of the struggling Souseke.

“Just what in the hell are you doing!? Explain yourself!”

“Wait a minute, Chidori. Didn’t you read the email I sent you?”

“Uh...well, umm...” Kaname faltered. Because she had been so angry at Souseke, she had deleted the email he had sent her without looking at it.

“I tried to tell you in advance. Since you wouldn’t listen to me, I took the trouble of-”

“I... I don’t know anything about an email!”

Realizing in a time like this that she was wrong but not being able to apologize was Kaname’s weakness.

“A-anyway, no matter what the reasons, this kind of sea-jacking is unforgivable, isn’t it!? Aren’t you guys an *anti-terror* mercenary unit? It doesn’t make sense.”

From behind them came a new voice.

“That’s not true. We are being consistent.”

When Kaname looked around, the masked, ash-blonde maid armed with a submachine gun was walking towards her.

She looked more suspicious than a common terrorist.

“Who are you...” Kaname started to say, but trailed off. The masked maid- Tessa, laughed boldly.

“Hoo hoo hoo...I’m the supreme leader of the ‘Liberation Front Troubled Over Something’, or the LFTOS for short.”

“That’s not the same name as before, either.”

“Don’t worry about it. Anyway, I am the terrible leader of a group of veteran terrorists. I’ll kill children without mercy,” she said, and then went “ba-ba-ba-ba”, pretending to shoot her submachine gun.

“...you’re a child yourself. See?”

Kaname grabbed Tessa’s sunglasses and snatched them off.

Tessa’s true face was exposed, and with her large eyes moist with tears, she hastily waved her hands around trying to get them back. When Kaname said “here”, and handed them back, Tessa took them back.

“Good. Without these to make you feel so tough, you look like you’re gonna be crushed by your guilty conscience...”

“Then it would be better if I didn’t pretend, right!?” Tessa sounded as if she had just been stricken. “You’re right... but this was the most reliable and safe way to do it. I... I’m really sorry about making the passengers feel uneasy or inconvenienced. Personally, wearing these sunglasses and acting like a gangster lets me keep a clear mind...”

“...oh no,” Kaname said, and stole her sunglasses again.

“Ahhh, g-give them back! If I don’t have them, I’ll, I’ll...”

Tessa looked as if she were about to cry as she grabbed Kaname.

“Looks really painful, there...”

“I said it was, didn’t I!”

“Quit it, Chidori. Give them back to her.”

When Sousuke reproached her, Kaname got mad at him.

“Hmm... who are you to tell me what to do?”

“Give them back!”

“...nooope. Hmph.”

“You’re causing the Captain problems, aren’t you? I was trying hard to explain this to you before.”

“Even so, you’ve got a problem in the way you convey stuff, you know!”

She’s still fighting with me, Sousuke thought and shook his head tediously.

“Would you please give me a break, Chidori? You’re acting even more unreasonable than usual.”

“Well excuse me! I’m just an unreasonable, loud girl!”

“I didn’t say that. Why do you always-”

“Give them back, give them back-”

“Ah, you’re annoying, too!”

“Just give them back to her and listen to me!”

“Will you stop giving me orders!? You’re always doing that!”

“I have to since you’re so stubborn.”

“You’re just as stubborn as me, aren’t you!? When something happens, you talk all big. Well, don’t you!? You’re always-”

“Whatever you’re fighting about, just give me back my glasses!”

There was Kaname, who wouldn’t give in, and Sousuke, who was irritated. There was also Tessa, who was waving both arms around feverishly trying to get her glasses back. It was a truly unproductive sight. Then a new voice resounded over the commotion of the three.

“Cut it out!!”

It was Mao. Holding Captain Harris prisoner at gunpoint, she made her way over to them. They all shut up when she scolded them.

“Really... what are you guys making such a racket about? And Sousuke! Why is Kaname mad!? Didn’t you explain it to her!?”

“I... didn’t.”

“That was a terrible oversight. All of the other school kids and faculty fell in line properly, but her position is different, isn’t it!? This was your idea, wasn’t it? If you don’t do what you’re supposed to do, there’ll be problems. Carry out your responsibilities, Sergeant!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to put this in my report.”

“I don’t mind. It was my mistake,” Sousuke admitted without saying a word about Kaname’s mistake. It was an admirable thing to do despite the commotion up until now.

As she watched from the side, Kaname’s chest tightened in pain. Speaking paradoxically, if he were the type of man who would say “It’s Chidori’s fault” at a time like this, there wouldn’t be the stubbornness like there was just now, or the problems.

But because he was this way, she couldn’t give in.

“...well, fine. We’ll talk about this later. We’ll explain it to her now. Kaname, you come, too.”

“Eh? Where?”

“To the vault room. Isn’t that right, Captain?” Mao said with a grin looking in front of her. Looking downcast, Captain Harris’s pale face froze up.

“Umm, Captain...?”

If he had been a captain affected by the sea jacking, he probably would have said something to Kaname, who was his passenger. “Don’t worry”, or something like that. But instead he only scowled at her and said nothing.

Not one word of encouragement or comfort.



Just before the sea-jacking occurred

Commander Killy B. Sailor, who commanded the US Navy's SUBPAC attack nuclear submarine *Pasadena* and had come to Japan on holiday, was in the telephone corner. Since the regular guests had already moved to the dinner hall, there was no one else around.

Sailor was arguing with his wife, who was back at their home in California.

"-for Christ's sake! I thought I'd call and ask what happened, and settle this! Huh? ... Idiot, I told you a thousand times, it's a mission! It was a mission! But you give me a hard time and run off the night before our Japan trip... give me a break! Huh? ...then tell me, what else am I supposed to do!? When my subordinates and engineers are wrestling with engine trouble all night, am I supposed to say 'I'm going home because *the all mighty god* will be mad at me'!? If you think I'm gonna do such a thing- what did you say!? You're just like that jerk Smith... what!? That's right! I'll have myself a good time! With a beautiful woman! ...shut up, Takenaka's in Hawaii!" Sailor yelled into the receiver.

He had blue eyes, and black short-cropped hair. His features were chiseled, his eyebrows were high, and his jaw was square- if you had to describe him in one word, it would be "rugged".

His physique was also the same. His body was built like that of a macho Hollywood actor. He himself felt that he hadn't been getting enough exercise recently, but he had no unsightly flab

anywhere around his waist, probably due to his genetics. That was how his family was. If someone were to meet him for the first time, and find out that he was in the military, they usually would ask “Are you in the Army?”, which made Sailor very uncomfortable.

He shouted at his wife, who was yelling at him hysterically over the satellite phone.

“Shut up, and quit that screaming! Anyway, the Navy is my life! If you can’t accept that... oh, very good! You can just go and mess around with all those good-for-nothing guys around there! You’re always- hello? Are you listening to me!?”

Sailor tapped on the receiver because he couldn’t hear her voice anymore.

“Hey, Eliza! If you’re gonna be that way...?”

Complete quiet. There wasn’t even any noise.

She had hung up on him.

“Damn that woman!”

Violently hanging up the phone, Commander Sailor tried to curse- then just sighed.

That was it. His married life was failing. He had planned this trip as a way to revive it, but it was over.

Oh, well. He had paid a lot of money to come this far. He was going to at least enjoy it.

Sailor calmed down and started to return to his table where a luxurious dinner was waiting for him, but something unusual happened just then.

The sound of noisy gunfire came from the dinner hall.

There was then the sound of the passengers screaming as well as other racket. They were the sounds of dinnerware falling off of a table, a pushcart being overturned, as well as someone yelling in a threatening voice.

There was no doubt about it. That was gunfire just now.
Either a submachine gun, or assault rifle-

“Huh!?”

It couldn’t be a sea-jacking, could it?

Wild footsteps approached from beyond the double doors in front of him.

The terrorists were heading his way.

Sailor quickly looked around his surroundings. He was the only one in the hallway. There was a girl’s bathroom right next to him. He quickly jumped through the door, and a moment later, he could hear the footsteps of the terrorists running in the hall. Right next to him.

They would probably check the bathroom next. If he didn’t find somewhere to hide quickly...!

In the center of the stalls was a maintenance door, which was used to adjust the water and sewer services on the ship. In a submarine these would be bare pipes, but on a cruise ship like this they were hidden by an inner wooden wall. Sailor opened the door and, stepping behind the inner wall, hid between the fat pipes.

It was a cramped place. Immediately after he hid, the men came in. They quickly and skillfully checked each of the stalls one by one.

“...”

When they confirmed that no one was in any of the stalls, one of them opened the door to the maintenance room in which Sailor was hiding and scanned the area with a flashlight. His heart was beating and he took a deep breath in through his nose, but somehow being in the middle of those complex and intertwining pipes hid his breathing, and the terrorist reported over his radio.

“This is Kano 23. E10 is secure with 0 people. No casualties. Moving on to E12.”

The terrorist violently slammed the maintenance door closed. Again, there was the sound of running inside the room. There was no idle talk whatsoever. From his experience, Sailor soon realized that these men had quite a bit of practice doing this.

It was silent again.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sailor slowly went back into the bathroom. With his shoulders heaving up and down as he breathed, he grabbed onto the sink and stared into the mirror in front of him.

“Think... god damn it, think...!!”

He didn’t break down and panic, nor did he cry in fear because, even though the places were different, he had experience passing through scenes of battles. There had been many times when he, as someone who had spent half of his life on submarines, had almost died. Most of them were due to accidents, but he had combat experience as well.

It wasn’t a well-known fact, but there were few active submarine captains who had ever actually fired on enemy ships. Probably only ten in the entire world.

And Commander Sailor, Captain of the *Pasadena*^{*4}, was one of those few.

That’s right. I’m a veteran. I know what I should do because I’m a man of the sea.

The terrorist had said “Kano 23” over the transmission earlier. He didn’t know what that call sign meant, but more than likely it meant that the enemy had a substantial number of people.

But...!!

“I won’t die,” he muttered to his reflection in the sink mirror.

So think. Remember the Hollywood movies. The bad guys who hijack something on Christmas night are always unexpectedly defeated by the hero who just happens to be there.

Yes, that's it. The hero.

So, in this situation, wouldn't "Commander Killy B. Sailor, a veteran submarine captain who happened to be on vacation while dealing with a divorce that would make any audience sympathetic" be the perfect hero!?

Yes, that's it. No one would expect it...!!

In a moment, a new sensation swept through his mind and body.

There's no doubt. The night will be mine! Thrilling fights and daring risks! Romance with the beautiful heroine! And a heroic showdown with the villain!! My problems with my wife Eliza are trivial in comparison!

And of course the big boss will be a ruthless and unusual man, someone who used to be a navy man himself. The heroine will be a member of the crew, in her late twenties with exotic black hair.

And my chief officer Takenaka... well, his role is to probably to be shot to death by a terrorist somewhere along the way.

Takenaka, the poor bastard...

He sighed mournfully. After arbitrarily killing off his subordinate, Sailor headed out.

But don't worry, Takenaka. I will avenge you for sure! Spurred on by the anger from your death, at around the 60 minute mark in the movie, I'll start my ruthless counterattack...!!

First, he had to find a weapon. For now, he had the skirt from a mop. He would attack the small fry and get a pistol. Then a machine gun. He felt the same as when he had seen the Medal of Honor shining brilliantly so long ago.

You'd better be ready for me, you terrorist bastards...!!



December 24th, 20:21 (Japan Standard Time)
In Front of the Vault Room on the Pacific Chrysalis

“...so? What’s up with this vault?” Kaname asked Sousuke and the others.

They were in the lower level of the ship, in an obscure pathway near the engine room. At the end of the path stood the problem vault. Its massive, unique alloy door remained locked fast in front of Kaname and the others.

These kinds of cruise ships were often equipped with a large vault for the safekeeping of valuable gems, treasures or works of art. On a ship of this scale, it was like a very small bank.

“Don’t tell me that you came to rob this?”

“That would be correct,” Mao replied easily, beckoning to the end of the line. “Now then, Captain. Come over here.”

Sousuke prodded him in the back, and Captain Harris stepped in front of the vault door. He wore a bitter look on his face.

“Will you open it for us?”

“I refuse. What business do terrorists have with a vault? Do you think you can get away with this farce? If you hurt my precious passengers, I will make you regret it!”

“Hmm, and you’re telling us to cut out our act?” Mao gave him a thin smile and waved her gun.

“What are you talking about?”

“October of last year, this ship went to the new Kurusu shipbuilding dock for repairs. There isn’t any paperwork left, but apparently they did quite a bit of work in the area around the vault room. Using the space for the fuel tank, they remodeled the isolated compartment and extended a very strong and solid barrier

wall. It's pretty unbelievable that an ordinary passenger boat would need such work, don't you think?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Without any regard for operating efficiency, the workers were replaced daily- was that so they didn't catch on to what you were working on?"

"I don't know. The repair work last year was simply to upgrade the fire prevention equipment. And besides, as far as this and that with the construction work, I myself am employed by the company and have no authority over it."

"Of course the you on the surface wouldn't. But there's no reason that the you as a Captain wouldn't know about the armed guards or this area of the ship, is there?"

"..."

"And I know that you received a certain amount of money from 'someone' from the board of directors who own the company. They have no connection to the foundation on paper, but somehow there's a flow of money there."

It was like a scene from a crime drama. Mao was the detective, and Harris was the criminal. Kaname was the unknowing audience A.

"What do you mean...?" Kaname asked, and Mao shrugged her shoulders.

"Basically that inside this vault is something that is even more important than smuggled goods. For Amalgam, perhaps something extremely important..."

Harris's shoulders suddenly stiffened up.

"So now he shows his true colors," Mao grinned.

"Besides, the way you looked at Kaname just now. I don't think she's just another 'precious passenger' ...is she? You knew about her before now."

“...”

Harris's face went pale. His fingers and jaw trembled, both eyes opened wide, and his forehead as well as the back of his neck starting sweating heavily.

“You should know who we are now,” Sôsuke, who had kept quiet up till now, said solemnly. “Shun On, Ariake^{*5}, the Perio Islands, Hong Kong... we always were on the defensive, but now we’re taking the initiative. If you understand you’ll cooperate with us.”

“...I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything of what you’re saying. It’s nonsense,”

Harris muttered after taking a deep breath. A moment later he looked at Kaname, who was standing near him, and suddenly sprang at her.

There was a small knife in his hand, which he had probably hidden in his cap.

“!!”

Kaname froze. Reaching out, he aimed for the nape of her neck.

But Sôsuke had moved faster.

He used the stock of his shotgun to hit Harris in the arm, then quickly counterattacked by driving it heavily into his unprotected stomach.

“Guh...” Harris groaned, and dropped to his knees. Sôsuke then kicked up, hitting him in the face and causing him to fall backwards. Harris coughed violently.

“This is this man’s true character.”

Even Kaname, who was always beating up on Sôsuke herself, turned pale at this show of violence.

“...uh.”

Mao just shrugged in front of the now groveling Harris.

“My my. What a shameful change of character. Were you going to try to take her hostage? Too bad. It’s time to drop the ‘perfect gentlemen’ act.”

“That’s right. Your actions are nonsense.”

“Uh...”

With Harris crouched down in front of him, Sousuke continued.

“I have an idea as to why you got my school involved and what you were planning. You intended to take all of the students hostage to coerce Chidori into doing something, didn’t you?”

Bulls-eye. Harris gnashed his teeth and gave Sousuke a cold look.

“But, remember...”

Sousuke grabbed him by the nape of the neck and jerked him up. He pressed the tip of the knife that he had taken away against Harris’s neck.

“...it’s not just Chidori. Just try to even lay one finger on any of these students. I personally will peel off your hide and take my time about killing you. Got it? I will make you feel the worst kind of pain and despair. If you think that Mithril is really posing as an ‘army of justice’, then you’re seriously mistaken. We know your style, too. Don’t forget it.”

“...”

The man’s face twitched in terror. Tessa, perhaps from feeling Sousuke’s quiet malice, looked very unsettled and didn’t stir an inch.

“Sagara is very scary, somehow.”

“He really does have a strange edge to him.”

“He must be angry because he’s hungry.”

“He seems to be in a bad mood...”

Kaname and Tessa whispered back and forth to each other from nearby. Sousuke overheard their conversation, and with his temple twitching, said, "...Chidori. I'm right in the middle of threatening a prisoner right now, so could you be a little quieter?"

Kaname's demeanor suddenly changed at his remark. She gave him a sullen expression.

"Why did you only say it to me?"

"Huh? Th-that's-"

"That's right! Don't differentiate between us! You should scold me, too!" Tessa cut him off.

"Why is he like that..."

"That's because Sagara always acts reserved around me."

"That's not the problem, is it!?"

"That is the problem! He always is. Are you only leaving me out?"

"Tessa, you're..."

"I get it, so will you two be quiet-"

Mao, who was standing beside the three who were arguing yet again, composedly reached into her vest and took out a large handgun.

Silently, she aimed at the ceiling and fired.

After an ear-piercing metallic sound, dust rained down around them.

In front of the now silent Kaname, Tessa and Sousuke, Mao returned her handgun back into its holster, clearing her throat.

"Now then. Let's not pursue this conversation."

"Yes ma'am..." Kaname and Tessa answered at the same time.

"Speaking of which, Captain. Will you quietly open the door for us?"

"Okay. But I can't open it."

“Not you, Captain, that Captain!” Mao yelled angrily, and putting her hands together apologetically, Tessa dropped her head.

“Ummm. I was... only kidding.”

“Good grief.”

Mao scratched her head.

Getting back to business, Sousuke and Mao threatened Harris. To relieve some of the tension, Kaname and Tessa kept their distance.

“Let’s see. Anyway, open it.”

She pulled Captain Harris up and made him stand in front of the console.

“I... it’s impossible. I can’t open it,” Harris sputtered incoherently after reading the display screen.

“Again? Are you just trying to buy time? Huh?”

“It’s true. The electromagnetic lock for this vault has already changed to emergency mode. It won’t accept my pass code.”

“Oh, is that so? Then if I do this, will it accept it?”

Mao pointed her submachine gun at Harris’s right knee.

“I won’t kill you right off. I’ll give you a friendly warning to start off with. Is that okay with you, Sousuke?”

“That’s a reasonable course of action.”

“I’ll count to three.”

Harris’s expression changed, and his entire body flinched.

“P-please believe me. There’s nothing I can-”

“One.”

“I’m not lying. When it’s in this mode, it’s-”

“Two.”

“P-please listen! No matter what happens, it can’t be opened-”

“Three.”

Mao aimed at Harris's knee, who had now taken on a look of desperation, and fired.

It was a three point shot. There was the sound of a muffled gunshot.

Harris let out a blood-curdling scream and fell over.

"Aaahh! Ah! Aaah! You shot me!? You damn bitch!"

"Next is the left leg."

"Stop it, stop it, please! It won't open! Damn it. It's true. I'm telling the truth...!"

Mao and Sousuke looked at the half-sobbing Harris as he clutched his leg, and then looked at each other. They seemed somewhat disappointed.

"What do you think, Sousuke?"

"I don't think he's acting," Sousuke stated, watching him calmly.

"So that means we won't be able to do this the easy way, then..."

"That was the assumption to start out with. Let's begin the operation."

"Right. Get Spake and the others to bring the equipment."

"Roger."

Sousuke flipped his radio on and made contact with the other teams.

"Hey, Admiral! How long are you planning on crying? Hurry and get up!"

Mao violently kicked Harris as he wallowed around in pain. Kaname and Tessa, who had been surprised by the sound of the gunshot and had run back this way, cried out in protest.



“M-Miss Mao!? No matter how bad a person he is, that’s going too far!”

“Melissa? I know that it was inevitable, but you should at least give him some first aid...”

Mao frowned.

“First aid? All he needs is some ointment.”

“Huh?”

“See? It was just a rubber bullet.”

There wasn’t one drop of blood coming from where Mao had shot Harris in the knee. If it had been a real bullet, the floor would be stained red by now.

“Ouch ouch ouch!! A medic... someone call a medic!!”

The only one who hadn’t noticed this by now was Harris, who continued his grandiose display of pain and suffering.

Before long there were the sounds of many footsteps as the members of the other teams came to the vault. There were those among them who recognized Kaname, and said things like “Hey, Kaname!” and “How’s it going??”, but because they were all wearing the black masks, she didn’t know who was who.

Corporal Yang and another soldier were leading Harris away, who was still crying things like “Ouch” and “She shot me”. It seemed they were going to question him in another area of the ship.

They brought some assorted electronic machinery in on a cart. They were more than likely tools for getting the door open.

“So you’re gonna break the door open now?”

“Yes. We have to release the lock. This door’s covered by a barrier wall that even a direct explosion couldn’t scratch, like that of the reactor of an aircraft carrier.”

Mao removed the console panel with her own tools, and started working on the electrical equipment within.

“Is that strong?”

“Affirmative. The atomic reactor of an aircraft carrier is able to take a direct hit by an enemy missile without any damage. This vault is similar to that,” Sousuke replied.

“I was thinking of letting you see what’s inside, but... it seems that this is going to take some time. Would you mind going back to where the rest of your classmates are?” Mao asked.

“Okay. But what is inside?”

“We don’t know yet,” Tessa said, “but we’re certain it was for getting you. It’s probably something made by a Whispered, such as the TAROS or some other research device... after this we’re going to question the Captain and break into the vault. Then we’ll thoroughly collect all the data and withdraw from this ship.”

“Oh, so that’s why you came, too,” Kaname finally realized. As a captain of an underwater submarine, Tessa was indeed very capable- but the moment you threw her into a gunfight, she became just about useless because of her clumsiness. She had made careful preparations just in case there was trouble like the time in Ariake, but it was still a rare thing for her to do it on the scene.

“That’s right. My expertise and power is necessary to investigate the equipment inside,” Tessa said, puffing up a little.

“I had thought that you just wanted to come and play dress-up in a maid’s outfit.”

Tessa drooped.

Ah, I think I went a little too far, Kaname thought, but Mao immediately agreed with her.

“Kaname’s right, Tessa. One can’t help but thinking that about you today.”

“I see...”

“So I’m asking nicely, please don’t get in our way, Captain.”

And without any regard for the now disgruntled Tessa, Mao connected a few cables to her laptop computer and said into the radio, “Uruz 2 to Kano 6. Try cutting the power a little to C35.”

It wasn’t long before the ceiling lights blinked for a moment, then lit back up again. Mao looked at the holographic depiction on her laptop and clicked her tongue.

“Ahh, no good. Alright. Go back. Just as I thought, it’s independent... yeah, we’ll have to disable the security features one by one. We’ll need some help from Dana. The connection- yeah, the V-circuit and G-circuit are too slow. I’ll have to ask for a wire link-up. You’re bringing some fiber optic cable, right? Call turtle to starboard...”

Kaname quietly listened to Mao’s technical conversation.

“Give priority connection to turtle. Huh? The Commander says no? Then tell him it’s an order from Tessa.”

When she heard Mao use her name without asking, Tessa got mad.

“Melissa! Please don’t use my authority all on your own!”

“Fine, fine. Then will you give me permission?”

“Well, I-”

“We’re in a hurry, so be quick, okay?”

Mao was waving her hands impatiently. After hesitating for just a moment, Tessa said with a sullen look, “...permission granted.”

“Okay, thank you... Spake, can you prepare the ‘stethoscope’?”

“OK,” Spake replied as he manipulated the device that would scan the inside structure of barrier wall by using ultrasonic waves.

“Alright, let’s test it once... hey, Kaname, you go back with the rest of the hostages. Sousuke, you take her. Tessa, don’t mess

around, otherwise you'll trip over a cable or something. Then you'll be in our way. You go over there. If you have some time, you could bring me a sandwich."

Mao ignored Tessa as she tried to protest, then clapped her hands together.

"Got it, everyone!? We don't have much time, okay? So let's get down to business!"

Everyone on the team to break into the vault replied with a "Right!" and then broke up.

Translator's Notes:

1. Pocky is a type of Japanese candy (you don't know that by now?!)
2. The term used here in Japanese is "Shuwa-chan", which is a nickname for Schwarzenegger in Japanese.
3. Soba is Japanese buckwheat noodles.
4. This might be confusing to some readers, so to clear it up: if you are in charge of a ship, you are called "captain" no matter what actual rank you may hold (i.e.: Sailor holds the rank of "commander", but is the "captain" of the Pasadena).
5. Ariake was where the Behemoth incident took place.

Chapter 3: The Two Captains

December 24th, 20:52 (Japan Standard Time)

In Front of the Vault Room on the Pacific Chrysalis

Since it was going to take some time to break into the vault, Kaname did as Mao told her and decided to return back to her classmates for the time being.

Sousuke followed her at once.

“It’s okay. I can go back by myself.”

“No, I’ll take you.”

Just then, Kaname noticed as Tessa, depressed because Mao had dismissed her as being a nuisance, glanced their way.

For some reason, Kaname felt indescribably guilty.

Compared to Tessa, she was getting special treatment. Almost like they were playing favorites. She didn’t think it was fair.

Kaname turned around because of these feelings.

“I said I was okay.”

“It’s not okay. I’m going with you.”

Since Sousuke wasn’t giving up, Kaname did, and without pressing the matter any further continued walking. Sousuke followed in silence. They left the vault room, and headed over to the elevator that went to the upper decks.

Me with such an unreasonable guy... she thought.

Just an hour earlier, she had said things like “I don’t care about that idiot” and “he doesn’t think that I’m important” to Kyouko.

As she gradually comprehended the situation, she realized that she was the one who had been the idiot. And she hadn’t apologized at all. She had kept lashing out at him ever since they

had started fighting a few days before, even going so far as to be mean and say horrible things to Tessa.

She had shown them her anger, and had been extremely rude.

Even though Tessa was in a much more difficult position, Kaname had acted jealous.

She didn't even understand it herself.

Why did she always act like this?

I suppose I'm too naive...

It might be that.

It also might be that today was a special day for her.

It also might be that she felt troubled when he wasn't around.

But she wasn't always this way. Hadn't she proven that on that rainy day two months ago?

And she wasn't sixteen anymore.

When she thought that, she finally spoke.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Umm... never mind.”

“Okay.”

There was a long silence.

She stood in front of the elevator and pushed the button to go up- then awkwardly, Kaname opened her mouth again.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Even though it's turned into such a mess...”

“Yes?”

“I'm also... well, I'm happy that you came,” she somehow managed to say, and gripped his sleeve lightly. She couldn't bring herself to take his hand.

Then there was a long- a very long, silence.

“I... I’m acting weird all of the sudden, aren’t I?”

“No. I don’t think it’s... weird.”

Now it was Sousuke who was having trouble with words.

“I’m also glad.”

“Y-you are...?”

“Yes. Hm...?”

Sousuke glanced around the corner of the elevator hall and pathway.

“What’s wrong?”

“No... it’s nothing.”

“Huh?”

“It’s probably okay.”

There was a piquant ‘ding’, and the elevator doors opened.

After they stepped inside, Kaname rallied her spirits and in a voice of forced cheerfulness said, “Um, you know, do you think we could try going up to the observation deck? There isn’t a need for me to rush back to everyone, is there?”

She put her finger on the button for the very top floor, waiting for his expression.

“Well, since there probably won’t be any more fighting tonight, it shouldn’t be a problem, but... isn’t it cold outside?”

“It’s okay, since it’ll only be for a little bit.”

“Okay. Wait a second.”

Sousuke turned on his radio and began communicating with someone. Because the conversation was full of code names and technical language, Kaname wasn’t sure what they were saying.

“-Uruz 7, roger. Thanks... it’s okay, we can go,” Sousuke said after he turned off his radio.

Kaname’s face lit up with a smile.

Corporal Yang from the SRT and Private First-Class Wu from the PRT (Primary Response Team) escorted Captain Harris to the area for the crew cabins.

It was a never-ending, dreary passageway.

Since it wasn't an area for guest use, there were all sorts of pipes and steel framework showing. There weren't any nice fixtures or carpet down here, either.

"...that, Corporal. So then I said to the girl, 'Hey, even if it is Christmas, you shouldn't be wandering around this city at this time of night. You never know what some bad guy might try to make you do.'"

"Right."

"So then- she was only eleven or twelve years old, right? Pretty young. She looked a little like Sergeant Major Mao, and she grinned at me."

"She's a Second Lieutenant, now, though."

"Well, then she took this huge revolver out of her purse. It was a 38 caliber with a barrel five inches long. She said, 'Beat it, solider. You're disrupting business.'"

"Ha ha ha..."

"It was a terrible place. Made me question if there was a god or not. The only decent hospital was on my base."

Yang and Wu were sharing Christmas stories.

"However, Wu, I was hoping to hear a more lighthearted story. Thanks to you I feel more depressed now... say Captain, could you walk a little quicker?" Yang called out in an easygoing voice to Harris, who was walking along sluggishly with his hands handcuffed behind him and dragging his right leg.

"I was shot in the leg, wasn't I? You could prepare a stretcher, but...!!" Harris lectured him angrily.

“You’re full of orders, aren’t you, old man? Corporal, I don’t wanna guard this guy.”

“I don’t, either. Damn it, I’m jealous of Kurz’s post.”

“In a room full of high school girls...”



At the same time the two of them were complaining, the masked figure of Kurz Weber stood on the stage in dinner hall, intently playing a guitar and yelling into the mike.

“Whoa!! Taake meeooouuut trench! Right before my eyes!
The faaat, black! Cat, he said to mee!! Yeah!”

The Jindai High School students thunderously applauded, clapping their hands and moving their bodies.

“Oooh, look at that technique!”

“Wow! That masked man is so cool!!”

“...that guy’s voice sounds like a foreigner I’ve met before...” Kyouko muttered, but no one heard her.

“Thank yoouu!! C’mon, everybody!!”



Yang and Wu didn’t quite hear the racket that Kurz and the others were making, but they continued walking down the corridor, sighing deeply.

“Didn’t he throw away his guitar...?”

“That was how he felt at the time. He’s a capricious person.”

“Since he’s susceptible to flattery...”

“He wants to show off...”

The two complained, and then...

There was a sound from the crew cabin beside them. It sounded like a ballpoint pen or something dropping, then the rustling of clothes.

“...Uruz 9 to Uruz 1. Is one of our people in D30?” Yang whispered into his radio. He was already pointing his submachine gun towards the cabin. It was loaded with non-lethal rubber bullets, but its striking power was nothing to laugh at. If you shot them rapid fire at someone’s face, the effect was like a rain of blows dished out by a pro boxer. Wu pulled Harris back towards him, and he and Yang looked in the opposite direction.

The number of people restrained by the teams as well as the number of crew and passengers had already been confirmed. Other than allies, there shouldn’t have been anyone else straggling about, but-

Clouseau replied quickly.

“Uruz 9. That’s a negative. Report the situation.”

“There was a sound from a cabin. We’ll investigate.”

“No, transporting the Captain is your first priority. I’ll send others out there.”

Yang gave a little click of the tongue.

“That won’t work, they’ll have run away by then. I’ll confirm it. If I don’t contact you in one minute, secure the area. Over and out.”

“Wai-”

He cut the radio off. Using hand signals to tell Wu “Wait here”, Yang approached the problem cabin.

There was a faint sound of rustling clothes.

Yang took a deep breath, and then opened the door. He stepped quickly into the room.

On the bed lay a white cat. There was no one else. Was it someone’s pet?

“...it’s a cat.”

“A cat? Good grief.”

Yang’s shoulders relaxed as he looked back in Wu’s direction from the doorway. Behind Wu and Harris was a large, heavy-built man holding up a bucket.

“Wu, behind you—”

But he was too late. The bucket came down on Wu’s head. The man then thrust the dirty water bucket upside-down on his head, causing Wu to stumble around in a circle.

“Uwabu...!?”

“Wu!?”

Even though Wu and Harris were directly in his line of fire, Yang shot without hesitation. They were rubber bullets, after all; they wouldn’t die.

“Ouch owowowowowowowow!!” Wu screamed through the bucket on his head, and Harris crawled on the floor. The attacker struggled to hide behind the two, and grabbed the wire that was hanging from the wall.

“Take this, you terrorist bastards!!” the man yelled, and yanked the wire with all of his might. There was the sound of metal moving out of place.

“Eh? Wha—”

Another bucket dropped from the ceiling, and struck Yang on the head.

The clear sound like something falling rang throughout the corridor.

The moment everything went white, Yang thought, “I feel like I’ve seen this somewhere before a long time ago...”

After he had thoroughly hit the bucket-wearing terrorist called Wu over the head with a mop, Sailor screamed at the top of his lungs, “Ho... how’s that! Have you learned your lesson!?”

Breathing heavily, he kicked the terrorist in the butt. The man muttered, “Ye-ah...” and didn’t move.

“Hey, you! Are you the Captain?” Sailor moved to help the handcuffed crewmember.

“Uh...”

“Don’t worry, I’m on your side. I’m Killy B. Sailor, US Navy. I’m Commander of the *USS Pasadena*, and I happen to be a veteran tough guy riding your ship. After this whole affair is resolved, I’d like you to introduce me to everyone in the media as ‘the truly patriotic, invulnerable man, Captain Sailor’.”

“O-okay...”

Sailor picked up the enemy’s machine gun and checked the number of bullets remaining.

Good, there was enough. The color of the bullet heads seemed to be different from those he had seen in basic training, but sailors didn’t worry about such trivial things.

“First, we need to get out of here. Enemies are coming. You can walk, right? Or more preferably run.”

“Wa-wait a minute, Sir. Before that how about these handcuffs-”

“Ah, what a pain. Here, give me your hand.”

He roughly searched the terrorists’ bodies, found a bunch of keys and then removed the Captain’s handcuffs.

“That should do. Now, let’s go.”

“No, I have to find a radio and contact the outside. You go on alone.”

“What are you talking about? It’s too dangerous by yourself, that’s why you should come with me.”

“I thank you for your concern, but I will be fine.”

For some reason, the Captain was stubbornly adhering to independent action.

“This ship is like my home. I know all of its hiding places. Plus, it’s best to avoid the danger of both of us being caught.”

“Hmm...”

“Let’s meet up later. You know the shopping center? There are plenty of places to hide there.”

“Got it. Take care.”

“Until then.”

The Captain turned away from Sailor and ran off.

Sailor didn’t notice the look of triumph on his face.



When Tessa walked back to the vault room from the corridor near the elevator hall, Mao, who was hard at work on releasing the lock, said to her, “Hey, Tessa. Don’t walk all over the place. When we break the lock, I’ll call for you, so just settle down until then. Cause with you, if you do something dumb on top of everything else...”

Staring into the display, she didn’t even try to see Tessa’s face. None of her other subordinates seemed interested in her at all, either. All of them were immersed in their own jobs.

“Excuse me, Captain. Can you move back a little?”

“Captain, that’s not a good place.”

“I’m sorry, Captain, but I can’t concentrate.”

Everyone kept telling her. It was annoying at first, but after so many times, Tessa lost the will to argue. She was a bother. She didn’t even have any information on how to open the door. The maid’s uniform, which she had shown off to everyone before the operation saying, “Isn’t it cute?”, was making her feel miserable at the moment.

She had asked, should I bring something to drink? Mao and everyone had answered, “Yeah, do whatever you want”. How about Chamomile tea? she asked. “Whatever,” everyone had said indifferently.

She had successfully become completely useless.

Her shoulders drooping as she grappled with her acute solitude, Tessa walked to the crew kitchen on the same floor. It took her a few minutes. Compared to the kitchen for the passengers, this one was extremely modest. She looked for the materials to make tea, but she could only find some coffee cups. She took out a small bottle of herb tea, which she had brought along with her in advance, and at a loss for what to do, she sighed.

She took off her sunglasses and rubbed her eyes. She wasn’t crying, but she was depressed.

But right now, they were in the middle of a mission. She had to treat the field trip mood accordingly. On the other hand, she could assess her subordinates’ dedication and concentration going into a mission.

However- no one would give her any notice. Even though today was a special day.

Even Sousuke. He had gone with her.

And in that elevator hall-

Now in a dark mood, she was pouring some water into the teakettle when she received a transmission in the tiny wireless radio attached to her ear.

“Uruz 1 to all units. We have an emergency.”

It was Lieutenant Clouseau from the bridge.

“Uruz 9 and Kano 28 were attacked close to B19. Their injuries are light, but- they lost the Captain as they were escorting him. Use caution. At the present, Uruz 3’s team has secured the

area and is closing in, but there is a possibility that they have already slipped out of the area-”

Someone had attacked Corporal Yang and whoever was with him, and had taken Captain Harris.

When she heard the report, Tessa froze up.

So, trouble's finally here. She had to stop worrying like a little girl and get a hold of herself.

Clouseau's report continued.

“-it seems that the attacker is a passenger. He's probably doing this out of a sense of justice. Don't kill him, or perhaps them. I repeat. Killing or wounding the rebel is prohibited. The man who took Captain Harris is Caucasian, six feet tall, has short, black hair, a muscular build, and is wearing a suit. He took a weapon, but it is loaded with non-lethal rubber bullets... I repeat, the attacker is Caucasian, six feet tall-”

Tessa stopped listening about halfway through Clouseau's communication. A man had suddenly run into the kitchen from the corridor outside.

He was six feet tall (180 centimeters), Caucasian, and wearing a suit. He had a muscular build, and short, black hair. Incidentally, he looked somewhat like Arnold Schwarzenegger in one of his comedy movies.

To state it bluntly, he looked exactly as Clouseau had described.

The man pointed his submachine gun (probably Yang's), and yelled out in a throaty voice, “Riiight! Don't move, you terrorist bastard!! ...hm?”

When he observed the maid-uniformed Tessa, who was frozen in front of the range, holding a kettle and mug, the man's eyes narrowed dubiously.

“...uh.”

“Are you a crewmember? ...what are doing in a place like this?” he said, then made a lot of exaggerated and pointless gestures, saying things like “Come on!” or “Pow pow!”, and doing 360s pointing his gun.

“Uh, umm... you are...”

“Don’t worry! I’m on your side. I just happened to be a brave passenger who was coincidentally riding on this ship. I just dealt with a couple of the terrorists just now.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve already rescued the Captain, but he went off somewhere by himself. I’m a little worried, but- he’ll survive, I’m sure.”

He had let Captain Harris- a man connected with Amalgam, loose?

“How could you?”

“Don’t say that. I’ve stopped them for now.”

“No, that’s not what I meant-”

“Anyway, it’s disappointing that you’re so much younger than the heroine I had imagined, but that’s the breaks, I guess. It’s dangerous here. Follow me.”

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about, but- huh, ah, ow! Please don’t pull me like that. Where are you-”

The man trod off heavily.

“We’re getting out of here! Those terrorist-scum will arrive soon! The moment they find you, they’ll do terrible things to you.”

“No, I don’t think so. Umm, well. Please don’t drag me, it hurts. Are you listening to me? Ah, ow ow ow ow...”

“Stop rattling on! Do you wanna live or die!? This pain is nothing! Run, sailor! If you have some balls, show some guts!”

“I don’t have anything like that!”

She didn't even have the opportunity to grab the submachine gun and glasses she had laid down in the middle of the kitchen. As he gripped her hand roughly, she was pulled, actually more like bounced, since she wasn't used to her high heels and kept stumbling, across the floor. Half crying, Tessa continued to protest.



About the Same Time The Pacific Chrysalis, Observation Deck

Everything will set a good mood, she thought, but despite Kaname's expectations, the observation deck was dark, cold and empty.

She could no longer see the night view of the bayside, and the freezing wind howled all around her. The sound of the waves was utterly melancholic, and it was as if the Tsugaru Channel or Sea of Japan had come out of a ballad.

On the other hand, it could set the mood for a lovers' suicide...

The feelings of nervousness and excitement were driven away by the sounds of the ocean. Kaname's eyes widened at the completely un-Christmas-like mood.

"It's a nice night," said Souseki, who hadn't picked up on the atmosphere. "I feel at peace in this kind of weather, because a moonless night helps support a surprise attack in the darkness. What do you think, Chidori?"

"You say that, but..."

However, it was rare for Souseki to talk like this. *Perhaps he's trying to raise the mood, somehow...* Kaname suspected.

“It’s cold, isn’t it?”

“Afghanistan in the wintertime is colder.”

“The wind is strong, too.”

“Strong wind is good. It decreases the danger of enemy security detecting your footsteps.”

“Some beautiful illumination would be nice.”

“We’re on guard right now. That would be foolish.”

“...”

The hopeless conversation wouldn’t expand. Normally, he would have continued on this topic.

Sousuke cleared his throat.

“Today is Christmas, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“It seems that there is a custom of giving presents on Christmas, so I thought I’d to give this to you.”

He took a fountain pen from his pocket.

“...?”

“At first glance, it may look like just an ordinary fountain pen, but it’s actually a small stun gun. The maximum output on it is 20,000 volts. However, the battery will only work for one or two uses, so keep that in mind.”

“Okay. Umm, thanks.”

Kaname was at first surprised by this gesture; but when she found out what it was, she was disappointed.

Another self-defense weapon. She had received quite a few of these things in which she had no interest so far. And now as a *Christmas* present. She was thankful, but it was still, well, unsatisfying. Utterly ignorant of her feelings, Sousuke continued to enthusiastically explain how to use the weapon, when his mobile radio made a small noise.

“Hold on a second.”

After listening to the communication, Sousuke frowned.
“What’s wrong?”
“There’s trouble. I have to get back to work.”
“Oh, I see...”
“You need to go back. I’ll take you back to where our
classmates are.”



The terrorists were not as capable as Sailor had first thought.

They were very organized, but their marksmanship was terrible, not to mention the fact that they didn’t seem to have the guts for this kind of thing. He could see that they were hesitant to fire at him. On the contrary, they looked very worried about shooting him and the maid.

They were very skilled at trying to surround him, but when they did, they looked confused and indecisive.

“Don’t move! Now just come quietly and- huh? Captain!? Owawawawahah! Ouch!”

The terrorist, who had just stepped out from behind a corner in the corridor, was caught off-guard as Sailor gunned him down and ran away.

Firing the submachine gun with his right hand while gripping the maid in the other, he yelled out a battle cry.

“Have you learned your lesson, you terrorist-bastard scum!? I don’t care how many of you there are, bring it on!”

“Umm, umm, since you’re just fighting on your own, could you please let me go?”

“That’s right, I’m your enemy! A man-to-man fight! Are you underestimating the great Sailor!?”



“H-he’s not listening to me...”

“You bastards, bastards! Wriggle like that worms you are!”

The maid’s entreaties fell on deaf ears. Sailor ran down the passageway, scattering the enemies obstructing his path. Of course he didn’t hear the mutterings of “Dammit, he’s fucking full of himself since we’re going easy on him,” as the terrorist he shot fell down.

“Aaah, Corporal Howard... please let me go, let me go!”

The maid struggled to try and free herself from Sailor’s grasp. Without any regard for her, he turned aside, aiming at an enemy that had appeared behind him, and fired. Then there was a thick “gotsun!” sound.

“How’s that!? Don’t underestimate the American Navy!
You bastards are... hm?”

The maid, whose head had just been rammed into a nearby pillar, dangled senselessly from his arm. Her pupils swam around dazedly.

“...oh, well. Anyway, if you think you can catch me, just try it! You terrorist scumbags!!”

Carrying the stupefied maid, Sailor continued on his rampage, running away from the area.



About the Same Time

Deck Three, Corridor C, The Pacific Chrysalis

As he listened to the ringing gunshots from far off, Harris quietly inhaled and moved on.

There had been several times he had almost been discovered by his pursuers, but this was his ship. He knew its

structure quite well. There were routes that didn't run through the ordinary sections of the ship- since there were a number of maintenance rooms hidden in the interior, he had somehow been able to outwit the enemy and escape.

He could finally calm down and think. No, not yet.

This is bad.

Even though they had planned it out perfectly, they had been outsmarted completely. Mithril had attacked without hesitation, and restrained the passengers. What bastards.

At this rate, not only would they expose the contents of the "vault", but they'd also gather all sorts of data. Even if he were able to escape and hide- Amalgam would not be forgiving. They would kill him for sure.

So, what to do?

Should he just let them do as they liked, then go into hiding when they returned to port? No, that wouldn't work. It would be hard to escape from them alone. There was not choice other than to prove his ultimate loyalty to the organization by bringing them a present that would help him escape the repercussions.

In order to do so, he would have to contact them first.

And start "them" up.

He moved through the cramped crawlspace above the ceiling. Several times he heard careful footsteps approaching nearby. The enemy was looking for him. It was certainly a miracle when he finally managed to struggle his way to the rescue boats without being discovered.

Of course, this was Christmas. God was watching over him-

He slipped into one of the rowboats from the port side of the observation deck, then fumbled around in the pitch blackness

until he found the survival kit laying inside. Within the sturdy case was a satellite radio.

It wasn't his secret, personal line, but he remembered the frequency and code for emergencies. With an unfamiliar hand, he operated the radio and connected to a relay station under the influence of Amalgam.

"I have an emergency relay. Top priority. Please hurry...!" Harris reproached in a hushed voice. It wasn't long before a direct supervisor answered.

"What is it?" said an electronic voice.

"Mr. Gold- there's trouble. We've been attacked by Mithril forces. They've hijacked my ship, and are trying to force the 'vault' open."

The man on the other end of the line seemed to contemplate Harris's report, muttering "hmm, hmm...", then said, "So, what do you plan on doing?"

"Well, I-I..."

"You've risked valuable machinery and information, used an insecure line, and taken up my time to give me a report, haven't you? Tell me something."

"I... I'll get that girl somehow, and escape. If you'll make recovery arrangements."

"Do you think you can?"

"Yes," he replied. He really didn't have any other choice.

"Concerning which, I would like permission to use the *machines* which were stowed with the food stores the other day. If I can use those to create a disturbance, then I will be able to take advantage of the opportunity and obtain results."

There was a short silence.

For Harris, it felt like an eternity.

“Very well. They were put there for this type of situation, anyhow. The contents of the vault... well, give up on that. I’ll go ahead and explain the situation to the other executives. You get back to work. I’ll let you know the recovery procedure afterwards.”

“Th-thank you. I will definitely bring you results. That’s because of my unwavering loyalty-”

“Understood. Hurry up and get off.”

And before Harris could reply, the transmission was terminated.



About the Same Time Somewhere in East Asia

In the middle of their conference, the so-called solid reflections of the executive staff ended the communication with Harris and voiced their respective displeasure.

“He’s a hopeless fool.”

“It seems that he thinks we’re not aware of the situation yet.”

“It would probably be good to monitor the situation, first.”

“We used to have excellent subordinates.”

There were a number of dangerously cynical remarks.

Mister Gold, without changing his expression one bit, snorted a little bit.

“...I won’t deny that Harris is a fool. But I will not state that there was an oversight in choosing such a person.”

“How annoying. Wouldn’t have just kidnapping her on a normal day been simpler? We keep doing these things in such a round-about way...”

“Indeed. Curiosity is well and good, but this has gone too far.”

“And why weren’t we informed of this operation from the very beginning? This could be taken as an act of betrayal.”

“On the contrary, it’s quite the reverse,” Mister Gold said with an innocent look. “There’s no point in leaving the girl alone any longer. Don’t you feel that the incident with Mister Iron made that clear not too long ago?”

“That traitor, Iron.”

“It seems Mister Kalium was killed by that bastard.”

“Exactly. And there is something that I don’t understand about that. How come that within Mithril, only the Western Pacific fleet suspected the boat that much? Even General Amit, Commander of Mithril’s Intelligence Bureau, judged the *Pacific Chrysalis* to be clean as a whistle. However, the force on the *Tuatha de Danaan* had enough confidence to pull such a daring operation after doing their own investigation. Why is that? The most probable reason is that someone has leaked information to the *Tuatha de Danaan*. ”

One person clicked their tongue.

“Iron, huh. It was probably him.”

“He tried to burn down Hong Kong just for fun.”

Already the dead man’s- Gauron’s- thin, patronizing smile had come to mind. The executives wriggled around in discomfort.

The code name of the Amalgam officer had been very sarcastic up until now. Iron couldn’t be mixed with mercury, and therefore couldn’t become amalgam.

“And? What do you plan on doing now? At this rate those thieves from Mithril will take all of that ship’s information and withdraw.”

“Yes, they will. The value of that equipment is already low, but... even so, it wouldn’t do to let them do as they please.”

“You speak as if everything was already settled.”

“Three of the flying boats have been dispatched to the nearby waters. Each of them is equipped with a ‘Leviathan’. They should have arrived already.”

“Are you planning on sinking the ship?”

“There is no other choice.”

“And what about Kaname Chidori? Killing her would be pointless.”

When the person said this, there was a small laugh. In unison, the holographic figures encircled around the table looked at the one seat. Only the transparent characters of “Voice Only” could be seen floating in the room.

“What’s so funny, Mister Silver?”

“She won’t die,” the cool, refined voice echoed. It was the voice of an adolescent male.

“Why are you so certain? Is it because you’re also a Whispered?”

“Our power isn’t something so convenient. Only... I guess you could say simple personal thoughts.”

“Hmph...”

“However- we put some of ‘those machines’ in the food stores. If Harris starts them up, then they will be able to assist him in his job.”

“Personal autonomic cavalry, huh?”

“Yes. With just 12 Alastors. They will be given orders to find, protect and escape with Kaname Chidori.”

“Can those murdering puppets make those kind of advanced decisions?”

“It is not exactly what you would call advanced. The rules of engagement are very simple.”

“What kind of rules of engagement?”

“So why not try listening to Mister Gold?” the young man’s voice said in jest, but there was an iciness coming from his shadow.

When everyone had all eyes on him, Mister Gold easily continued, “‘Remove all obstacles’. Kill anyone in the way. That’s all.”



December 24th, 21:36 (Japan Standard Time)
The Open Sea around the Izu Islands, The Pacific
Chrysalis

When Tessa opened her eyes, the shootout was over.

Things had happened, and they had succeeded in running away.

After getting hit in the head and losing consciousness, Tessa managed to say, “It’s okay. I can move, now”, and then proceeded to walk while the “rebel” pulled her arm.

And worst of all, it seemed that she had dropped her radio during the gunfight.

As she staggered along connected with her new companion, she somehow managed to get information about him.

His name was Sailor, and he was an American. He and his subordinate had come on this trip for their vacation.

“By the way, miss, what’s your name?” Sailor asked as they approached the corner of the dim corridor, where he carefully listened for any noises.

“Umm... I’m Mantissa. Teletha Mantissa,” she said, naming the alias she often used.

“I see. Well, miss, from here on out you stay right behind me. Don’t worry, I’m a veteran. Those terrorist bastards wi- hey, where do you think you’re going?”

He violently grabbed Tessa by the collar as she started to toddle off in the other direction.

“No, it’s just... now that we’ve finished with the introductions, I was thinking we could go our separate ways here...”

There was no way that Tessa could subdue such a large man by herself. She had thought of yelling out, but- for some reason, at a time like this, there was no indication of friendly footsteps heading their way. She had to hurry up and get away from this person, so that she could inform everyone of his location.

“What kind of nonsense are you spouting!? Come on!”

“Uhh, but, but, I have a bad feeling about going that way.”

The way that Sailor was headed was in the direction of the on-board shopping center. Even in the staff meeting before the operation, it was the boundary deemed “hardest area to secure”. There were so many exits that finding a place to escape wouldn’t be a problem, and many of the goods in the stores could be used as traps and whatnot.

“Why don’t we go that way? I think that way will be better for both of us...”

She pointed in the direction of the sports gym on the upper deck. It was a blind alley. Perhaps her colleagues would come down this way before long, and then skillfully capture Sailor.

“That’s a blind alley. It would be difficult to escape.”

“Oh, is that right? Well, then, why don’t you throw away your weapon and surrender? I’m sure that those people aren’t as bad as you think.”

Sailor scoffed at her.

“You’re naive. Those guys are villains. They’re terrorists. An ordinary maid like you wouldn’t understand. Do you think you do? Have you even once had to fight terrorists?”

“Yes. Reluctantly, though. I hate doing it, but- ow!” Tessa gave a little cry as he smacked her upside the head.

“Why’d you do that-!?” she protested with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t make fun, stupid!”

“I’m not making fun of anything!”

“In any case, an amateur like you should shut up and follow me. Got it!? If you run away, I’ll shoot you to death!”

“That doesn’t make sense...” Tessa thought, whining.

However, it might be wise to go along with him like this and pretend to let him have control of the situation. She couldn’t contact her associates now, but she would probably get the chance to find a ship telephone before long.

In his touch just now, there was the feeling of the rage of an amateur ground soldier who has gotten in over his head. However, he wasn’t so bad that he was incompetent. No one else had been that worried about her.

“Very well, then. Anyway, let’s hide somewhere and wait for an opportunity.”

“Mm, it’s good you’ve got it. Let’s go.”

And then Sailor, in the end almost dragging Tessa, moved out.



As the dispirited Yang and Wu stood in front of him, Lieutenant Clouseau even lost the energy to shout at them.

“There isn’t any excuse...”

“We’ll accept any punishment...”

They were in the place where Yang and Wu had just been attacked- a corridor in the crewmen’s area. They were indeed standing at attention, very soldier-like, but were so wretched it was painful.

“I’ll deal with you after we get back. Get back to defending the cargo rooms,” Clouseau ordered. Yang and Wu saluted and ran off.

“...what are you doing? They may not be cut out for that,” said Lieutenant Castero, who had accompanied Clouseau, as he watched the backs of the retreating two men. His call sign was “Uruz 3”, and he was the Commander of PRT operations. He was a Latino male in his 30’s with a slender moustache.

“Do you mean Yang?”

“Yes. If it had been another SRT member, they would have probably killed the guy or rendered him powerless. But Yang couldn’t do it. That’s different from just being careless.”

“It might be because I forbid him from killing the guy.”

“That’s not a reason. He’s SRT, and depending on the situation, he has to prepare for the consequences and disregard that order. Although that’s not something I can say openly.”

“...”

“Yang has the skill and the experience, but not the mind set. He should be returned back to the PRT.”

“Lt. Commander Kalinin’s viewpoint is essential for that argument. After this operation is over-”

Just then he received a communication. It was from Sousuke’s team, which was carrying out the search for the rebels.

“This is Uruz 7. We were a moment too late. The rescue boat is completely empty. He took the satellite communication equipment. Be on guard.”

Because the friendly helicopters in the sky were causing interference with satellite communication equipment, there was a lot of static in the aboveground lines.

“Uruz 1, roger. The *de Danaan* intercepted the transmission. The MH-67 is already jamming the appropriate frequencies, so don’t worry about that. Expand the perimeter and search.”

“Roger.”

After he cut the transmission from Sousuke, Clouseau clicked his tongue a little.

“Damn. It seems Harris is better at hide-and-seek.”

If this had been a regular ship, they would have been able to track down Harris without any trouble at all. But the *Pacific Chrysalis* was huge. Without using metaphors, this ship was a city. There were only a few of them in contrast. They had been forced to divide up a majority of the personnel guarding the “hostages” until they had completed their takeover.

“Don’t jump to conclusions yet. As we’ve just seen, our problem attacker also reeks of being an amateur. They can’t do anything impressive.”

Just as Castero had said this, Mao contacted them.

“This is Uruz 2. We have more trouble. We’ve lost Ansuz. Her stuff was left in the crew kitchen. It may be that John McClane has taken off with her.”

McClane was the name of the hero in the movie “Die Hard”. In it, he single-handedly fought against terrorists that had hijacked a building. It was a big hit from back in the day.

“We know already. She is with McClane. Thanks to that, we have our hands full. Besides, why did you let her out of your sight?”

“Well, umm... damn, I screwed up! The barrier wall of this safe’s been more trouble than we anticipated, so we’ve had our hands full, too.”

This remark reminded Clouseau of their other problem, and he asked, “How much longer will it take?”

“I don’t know. It may take as long as planned, or it may take three hours more than that.”

“Just great. By then we’ll be surrounded by the Japanese Coast Guard.”

“That’s why we’re hurrying, but I’m worried about Tessa. When she’s not on that ship, she’s so clumsy she’s useless. We need to find her quickly.”

It sounded like she was working on the lock while she talked to him. The tone of her voice was brisk- actually, she seemed rather restless. Truthfully, she probably wanted to go looking for Tessa herself.

“Understood. Don’t worry about the Captain. Leave it to me, and keep up your work over there.”

“I’m counting on you.”

After the transmission ended, Clouseau groaned. His stomach had suddenly started hurting. It was the first time that had ever happened.

“Damn, one thing right after the other...

“That’s how it is. I’ve never seen a mission go as planned,” Castero said, shrugging his shoulders.

Then there was another communication. This time it was from Kurz Weber.

“This is Uruz 6. We have trouble!”

“What is it now?”

“The school kids have eaten up all of the food, and now they’re saying they want more. Can we let the cooks back into the kitchen?”

“Do whatever you want, you idiot!!” Clouseau shouted, and cut the transmission.



As soon as they had entered the shopping center, Sailor walked over towards the luxury items corner.

“Excuse me, Mr. Sailor? What are you looking for?” Tessa asked, to which he quickly replied, “I’m looking for alcohol. Some vodka would be good.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to...”

“That’s right, I’m going to make a Molotov cocktail. Weapons won’t be enough.”

“Please don’t! If you do something like that, people will get hurt!”

“That’s the point. We’re fighting those evil bastards, after all. The terrorists will scream, burn up and drop into the sea... oh, it’ll be a sight. You look, too. Oh, hey now!”

Just then he found about 10 bottles of “Spiritus”, a 90-proof alcohol. If you stuffed a rag down the neck, lit it then threw it, in an instant you’d have a firebomb.

He got some handkerchiefs and towels from another store, then quickly set to work. Even Tessa, who opposed this idea, ended up helping him finally.

After he had finished three bottles, Sailor cursed, “Dammit, I keep slipping and can’t get the stopper out.”

“...?”

When she looked at her partner's hand in the gloom, Tessa was taken aback. Sailor's hand was covered in blood.

"Oh, my god. When did you get hurt?"

"During the shootout. It seems I was cut by something."

"Why didn't you say so earlier!? We should go to the sick bay."

"Are you stupid!? The enemy has spread out their net. Besides, I don't need anything for a cut like this!"

"Then take off your jacket so I can have a look."

To a fair extent, Tessa had knowledge about emergency first aid. To build up her nerve, she had actually observed real surgical procedures.

"It's none of your concern! You're not a nurse, you're a maid. Since you're a maid, be maid-like by shutting up and making the bombs!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake... anyway, just let me see it."

"Hey-"

Tessa forcibly yanked off Sailor's suit and took his strong right arm in her hands. On the inner part of his elbow, just below the crease, his shirt was soaked in blood. There was a cut that would probably require five or six stitches.

"Do you know how to stop the bleeding? Right here. Press down here hard."

"O-okay..."

"Harder. Almost against the bone."

When Tessa touched the interior part of his upper arm, Sailor suddenly looked embarrassed.

"I... I know that much!"

"Really. Even with an injury like this, you're still able to shout like that and run around all over the place."

Either by stubbornness or stupidity, Tessa wondered. Despite her amazement, she took a nearby towel and tore it up.

“Of course I am. I’m a sailor, ain’t I? I wouldn’t cry about something like this.”

“A sailor? In the American navy?”

“That’s right. I’m on vacation right now. Whatever they’re hiding, I’m going to- huh!?”

Sailor screamed as she wiped the wound with a towel soaked in Vodka. Tessa giggled.

“A sailor doesn’t cry, does he?”

“You, you little-”

The United States Navy, huh? Judging from his conduct, he was probably a non-commissioned officer who was almost a chief-warrant officer, Tessa guessed. A middle aged-man who would kick the butts of the sailors on an old naval warship or above ground base while shipping supplies- something like that.

But on the other hand, she was worried by the fact that he wasn’t sunburned.

Does that mean he’s a desk worker?

Still thinking about this, she wrapped scraps of towels in place of bandages around his arm.

“...however, you’re a strange girl. You’re very composed for just a maid.”

“You think so?”

“Ordinarily, a maid would be more afraid and upset. But you’re so easy-going, even in this emergency... you’re somewhat like my subordinate.”

“Then he must be an excellent person,” Tessa said coolly, but Sailor made a sour face.

“Excellent, huh? More like the worst subordinate.”

“Ah.”

“He criticizes every little thing I do. He makes fun of his superior officer. That’s the worst. And he doesn’t give me an ounce of respect.”

“Is that so... I can’t tell you the details, but I can really sympathize with your feelings,” Tessa said, sighing deeply.

“Oh, is that so? You understand, do you?”

“Yes. Having your subordinates treat you like you’re worthless is really hard.”

“Ain’t that the truth. It’s hard. That bastard Takenaka doesn’t understand...!” Sailor agreed feverously.



At the same time, the vice chief of the US Navy’s attack submarine *Pasadena*, Lieutenant Marsee Takenaka, was having an enjoyable conversation with the attractive women seated across the dining table from him.

“Wow. When they said ‘sea-jacking’, I thought there would be more of a brutal atmosphere, but...”

“I did, too,” agreed the woman, who was wearing funny glasses and dressed in a black evening gown. “The terrorist gentlemen have been quite kind. They’ve paid attention to our needs, even going so far as to say, ‘If you’re bored, just say so’. I was quite relieved... well, honestly, when this incident is over, I intend to make some strong protests to the Operations Department...”

“Huh?”

“Uh, no, don’t worry about it... by the way, where is the man who was with you a little while ago?”

“I don’t know,” said Takenaka as he delightfully stuffed his cheeks full of fat, juicy steak. “Probably in one of the telephone

corners, discussing money matters or something with his runaway wife..."

"My, poor thing."

Takenaka waved his finger at the woman's display of compassion.

"Not really, it's what he deserves. He's utterly obstinate and never listens to anyone. I guess his wife can't put up with it, either."

"Really?"

"Really. Their family is full of good-for-nothings, so there's always some kind of trouble."

"Oh, my..."

"He's my boss, but he criticizes every little thing I do. He makes fun of his subordinates. That's the worst. And he doesn't give me an ounce of respect."

"That must be really hard."

"That's the truth. It is hard. I just don't understand him... no, no, I'm sorry. Anyway, let's enjoy our dinner, shall we?"

"That's right. What's happened tonight has nothing to do with me, so I think I'll take it easy."

"Huh?"

"Ah, it's nothing. Anyway, Takenaka, why don't you tell me more about yourself?" the woman said with a captivating smile.



"Actually, I also keep a certain position," Tessa revealed a little after listening to Sailor's own story.

"Oh?"

“As you can see, I’m young, and those who are older than me make fun of me. They probably don’t think I’m suited for my position...”

“Hmm, there’s a lot to a maid’s world, too, huh...”

“No matter how much I try to prove my worth, no one will recognize my accomplishments. They just treat me like I’m a nuisance in everything. It’s rather mortifying...”

“Yes, yes. I understand. I also worked my way up from a sailor, and it was hard to make it to my current position. Those bastard subordinates of mine from Annapolis used to make fun of me.”

“Eh?”

Tessa gave him a blank look when she heard what he said.

“Yo-you’re an officer?”

“That’s right. A commander. Although an amateur like you probably wouldn’t understand... I’m the Captain of a new-style Los Angeles-class nuclear submarine.”

“Eh? Ehh!?”

He served on a submarine. And he was the Captain.

Then she was completely taken aback when he continued, “Incidently, the name of the ship is the *Pasadena*, affiliated with SUBPAC... hey, what’s wrong? Do you have facial neuralgia or something? You look pale, too,” Sailor said, raising an eyebrow.

Tessa was shaking intensely, and there were beads of sweat pouring down her face.

During the Perio Islands incident at the end of August, the American submarine, the *Pasadena*, that Tessa’s ship almost sank, this man was the Captain of that ship.

“Yo-you’re-”

“I’m what?”

“You’re a- Captain?” she said with apparent difficulty, which annoyed Sailor.

“What, you don’t believe me!? I’m one of the few submarine Captains with actual combat experience out there! It wasn’t too long ago when we gave some mysterious, gigantic submarine a run for its money, making it back off and saving one of our ships on the surface. The military is considering awarding me the Silver Star for that. Impressive, isn’t it! ...uh, damn. That was confidential just now. Forget what I said.”

But now Tessa was also annoyed.

“Now wait just a second. What’s all this ‘mysterious’ business? And no one’s given me a run for my money, ever! And we also dodged two shots in that situation, so don’t make fun of my skill, either. There were mitigating circumstances for us, too!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

He didn’t seem to understand anything of what she was saying. Tessa came back to her senses and closed her mouth.

“Oh, no. It’s... well...”

“Well?”

“It’s classified. Please forget what I just said.”

“Eh? ...I don’t get it, but whatever.”

He didn’t seem the type that worried about details.

How did a person like this manage to make it all the way up to being a captain...? Tessa wondered in amazement.

Well, there were lots of reasons, actually. The US Navy was a large organization, but surprisingly inefficient and political. It wasn’t as if would be completely logical. Brute guys like him might get promoted by some stroke of luck.

However there was still one thing she couldn’t figure out.

“But Mr. Sailor, why is an American like you on this cruise? Why bother coming all the way to Japan when a Caribbean

cruise is much cheaper?” Tessa asked. Sailor’s face turned sullen and downcast.

“Umm... well, there are various reasons and such...”

“Reasons?”

“I used to serve on a ship that went to and from Yokosuka base a long time ago.”

“Ahh.”

“I wonder how long it’s been. Back then, when the Captain officially allowed me to look through the periscope of the ship, I saw Hachijojima in the distance. The weather was bad, so there wasn’t anything particularly beautiful about it- but even so, I was moved. I thought, ‘I’ve worked my ass off to make it this far.’ The memory of the way the light shone off of the windows of the houses there still has a place in my heart.”

Tessa could imagine how he felt.

Not just anybody was allowed to look through the periscope on a bridge. And for someone like him who was working his way up from being a sailor, it was probably an unexpected pleasure.

“I was thinking of showing that scenery to *the god*, but she and I are on the verge of divorce now. Our relationship has gone completely cold. Since I wasn’t sure what I should do, I wanted to show her how much pride I have in my work. I know to an outsider it probably sounds childish.”

It was certainly childish thinking. *But since he and I are in the same position, we might have both been doing the same sort of thing,* thought Tessa.

“Well, is your wife on this ship?”

“No,” he said with a small sigh, “the morning we were supposed to leave on this trip, I came home after work to find her room completely empty.”

“...”

“When I think about it, she never had any intention of going from the very start. I spoke with her on the phone earlier, but- well, I said some terrible things to her. But I understand now. She’s seeing another man.”

His voice was laced with desolation. The profile of Sailor, who had been so energetic up until now, for just a moment, seemed to look old.

“An ordinary, virtuous shore man. I’m upset, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“...nothing at all?”

“No, nothing at all.”

For some reason, Tessa felt like she was listening to music. A melancholy blues song that she had heard many times a long time ago- Elmore James’ *Sho’ Nuff I Do*.

Even though he had turned his back on her, she still loved him.

Even though there wasn’t anything she could do about it, she still loved him.

That was what that song was about. When she remembered the very un-Christmas-like melody, Tessa mumbled, “Me, too.”

She and Commander Sailor were the same. They had all the same troubles. Sailor cast Tessa a side-glance.

“Is there a guy you like?”

“Yes, but he...”

She had forgotten all about it because of the shootout, but now she remembered it again.

After they had parted ways in front of the vault room, she had followed behind Kaname, who was trying to carry on small talk with Sousuke, and had overheard their awkward conversation while they were waiting for the elevator.

Even the most thickheaded person would have been able to sense the special chemistry that existed between those two. That time, Tessa had been made to realize something that she was not a part of.

He didn't look at her.

He looked at that girl.

That was how it was.

"There's probably nothing I can do about it, either."

"Is that so? Well... if you feel that way, then that's probably true."

"Yes."

After she gradually wiped away a tear that had welled up with her index finger, Sailor hesitated, then said, "I haven't had much experience in love, but- you're young, and you have a good personality. You'll meet a better man sooner or later."

This was the most honest thing he had said up till now.

"...do you really think so?"

"Yeah. But make sure you find a sailor. You can't trust shore men."

"Ha ha... does that mean that you're a candidate, too?"
Tessa joked, finally breaking a smile. He just waved his hand indifferently.

"That's impossible. Kids are out of bounds for me. Anyway, I prefer big-breasted brunettes. Wah ha ha."

"...he doesn't know how to phrase things politely, does he..."

Sailor continued laughing, completely unaware of Tessa's sullenness.



In the kitchen, the cook said, “Hey, Mr. Guitarist-terrorist. Yeah, you. There’s a shelf behind you with cans of whole tomatoes. Could you bring them all to me?”

“Lessee, whole tomatoes, huh?”

The masked Kurz, who had his rifle hanging from his shoulder and was picking at what remained of the canapé, clapped his hands together and looked through the kitchen shelves.

“Ah, here it is. There’s only two cans, is that okay?”

Standing in front of a large, steaming pot, the cook yelled, “What? Ahh, damn, that’s right. This is different from usual. High school student eat a lot.”

“Well, they are growing kids.”

“I’m sorry, but would you mind bringing me some from the storeroom downstairs? There are two boxes of them. I can’t make this stew without tomatoes.”

“No problem. About where will they be?”

“You’ll know when you get there. There are invoices posted all over the place.”

“Roger-”

Kurz turned to the PRT soldiers who were also in the kitchen and said, “Hey, take care of this place,” and made his way down to the storeroom alone.

He passed through a darkened corridor and went down the stairs.

He had heard about Yang and the others being attacked, so of course he was on his guard.

This ship had many storerooms. Of those, the food that was used in the cuisine for the Great Hall (except for the fresh food), various-sized pieces of furniture, and the stage equipment were all kept in the storeroom right underneath the kitchen. Yang and Wu would be patrolling around the storeroom.

Kurz switched on his radio.

“This is Uruz 6 to Uruz 9. I’m coming that way, so don’t shoot me by mistake.”

There was no answer.

“Yang. Why aren’t you answering me? Teacher, someone’s not in their seat...”

Still no reply.

That was strange. Ordinarily, no matter what the situation, he would usually reply back with “Uruz 9, roger.”

“Uruz 9, answer me. Uruz 9,” Kurz called out again, all kidding aside, but he still didn’t receive a reply. He also used Wu’s call sign, but with no luck.

He contacted the bridge, where headquarters had been set up.

“Uruz 6 to HQ. We have a code 11 in area C. Shrink the perimeter.”

“HQ, roger. Be careful,” Clouseau’s voice replied back to him.

Don’t tell me those guys were trying to show off and got their asses kicked again... how embarrassing...

He corrected his grip on his rifle and approached the storeroom. The passageway felt confined because of the gun’s long barrel.

Tonight Kurz was carrying an automatic assault rifle. It was a German-made 7.62mm. It had been remodeled for higher targeting efficiency, but it wasn’t a sniper rifle. A sniper’s gun would be of no use in this kind of confined space.

He reached the door of the storeroom, then strained to listen.

He could barely hear the sound of something very low. It almost sounded like the hum of a fluorescent lamp, but it was a

little different. Then there were the light sounds of what sounded like someone treading through a puddle of water.

No, it was something thicker than water. It sounded almost gooey.

For some reason it didn't feel human. Strange.

He thought about it, but there was no helping it. Kurz took a deep breath, opened the giant door, and stepped into the storeroom.

The storeroom, with its pale illumination, was bigger than he had thought. The ceiling was also high. There were rows of small containers neatly lined up, as well as pallets with mountains of cardboard boxes stacked up on top of them. There were also glass windows and mirrors.

He couldn't see the area very well. While carefully sighting his rifle, Kurz continued deeper into the room.

There was one container that was wide open on the left side of the room.

Huh...?

No, it hadn't been opened normally. The metal fittings and hinges were broken, and the door was bent out of shape. It looked as if something on the inside of the container had forced it open using some incredible power.

He had a bad feeling about this.

It was something that you didn't learn in training. It was different from the feeling he would get if amateurs like Harris and the other guy were hiding somewhere and then sprang an attack on him- this was more dangerous.

He made it to the middle of the storeroom. In the gloom, the shiny floor reflected back the lighting. Some kind of red, syrupy liquid had been splattered forcefully across the room for

several meters; it was caked on the walls, iron poles and even the containers on the other side of the room.

Blood? Internal organs...?

Then he saw someone's leg on the other side of some crushed boxes.

Had this been what had made the sound muffled by the liquid earlier?

“...Yang?”

This looked as if a person had exploded-

In the next instant, Kurz quickly jumped to the side.

A large bullet crushed the floor where he had been standing. It raised up an enormous amount of dust, while at the same time sounding off a low, muffled gunshot.

He turned around towards the direction that the bullet had come from- aiming his rifle at the top of a container in front of him and to the right. “Someone” jumped off right in front of him, and he repelled them as they closed in on top of him with a horizontal hit with the barrel of his gun.

Whoever it was had tremendous power. Kurz’s rifle bent into an arch, hit and rebounded off of the wall. His hand went numb and a dull pain ran up through his index finger.

He caught a glimpse of his enemy, a large man wearing a coat.

Was this the passenger Yang had been talking about? No, it couldn't be. It wasn't a passenger. It wasn't even human-

“-!”

Kurz narrowly missed his opponent's fist, which went into the container behind him, causing a ear-shattering noise to ring through his ears. The robust man had almost the same destructive power as an enormous swinging hammer.

Kurz couldn't run away now, because its hand was gripping his neck.

"...guh"

It was merciless, firm, superhuman strength.

It raised its arm, and Kurz's toes left the floor. His eyes blurred. Pain wracked his body. It was trying to break his neck. He couldn't breathe. Most of his dimming field of vision was occupied by his enemy's face.

It was a flat mask. And where the eyes were supposed to be, there was only a straight, red-glowing slit.

It didn't have a nose or mouth.

And it was expressionless. Completely expressionless.

Kurz couldn't even read that it had any murderous intent at all.

Chapter 4: The Executives

December 24th, 22:50 (Japan Standard Time)

The Shopping Center on the Pacific Chrysalis

“...well, compared to before, I wonder if I’m building up a trusting relationship with my subordinates,” Tessa whined as she hugged her knees in the darkness. “But recently, I feel like they’re building a strange, suck-up kind of relationship because of something. Before, everyone said ‘Colonel’ or ‘Captain’ very courteously, but now it’s more like ‘Coloneeeel’ or ‘Caaaptain’ ...like I’m a child. I don’t like it.”

“Yeah. I don’t know why they would call a small maid like you such strong nicknames, but it must be pretty tough,” Sailor agreed with her as he looked through the items at the luxury goods counter.

“Mr. Sailor? I want you to forget about the Colonel and Captain part, but can you take me seriously for a moment? Since we’re both in the same position, I’m being honest with you.”

“Okay, I got it, I got it.”

“Are you really listening to me...?”

It wasn’t that Tessa just wanted to complain to her partner—it was actually her strategy. If she could stall Sailor by talking with him, then it would be easy for Clouseau to locate and surround them. If she understood his personality, it would be easy for her to guide his actions.

Naturally, she had a tendency of somewhat deviating from subjects such as military tactics and so on.

“Oh! Found it,” Sailor said as he shone a dim light on a row of small boxes on a shelf.

“What have you found? Are you planning on making some more dangerous weapons?”

“No, dummy, cigars. Cohiba Lanceros!? These are Cuban, aren’t they? They even sell these? I was starting to have a bad opinion of this ship for their lack of security, but they just redeemed themselves a bit.”

He tore off the wrapping, rummaged around inside and took out a cigar. He bit the end, tore it off, then spit it out on the floor without a shred of elegance.

“Umm, you’re going to smoke it? Could you please respect my health and...”

“Shut up! My brain functions differently with this than without it. So if I can smoke, then I’m gonna smoke! ...so, now, hmm...fu-”

He lit the cigar with a burner-style lighter, then exhaled the smoke with a look a pleasure on his face. Tessa couldn’t restrain herself and turned her face away, coughing violently.

“Cough, cough- ...?”

She was then hit by a strange sensation, and sniffed the air a little. The smoke from Sailor’s cigar smelled a little like flowers. The scent reminded her of when she had pulled the cork off of a small bottle of dry potpourri-

Why was that? It felt very familiar.

“I hate Castro’s guts, but there are two things I like about Cuba- their baseball players, and this cigar. Even Kennedy approved of the trade of Cuban cigars.”

“Ahh.”

“A superior officer that I respected once said, ‘Lord God, our power evermore, whose arm doth reach the ocean floor, o hear us when we say our prayer, so that you may give us a cigar.’^{*1} He

was a very heavy smoker,” Sailor said in a rising, clear, sonorous voice. The cigar flickered lightly in the darkness.

“Isn’t that a parody of an old navy song?”

“Hmm, yeah, it is... wait, you know that!? Are you really a maid?”

“No, well. Anyway, about that superior officer of yours, what was his name, if you don’t mind my ask-”

Just then, from far off, there was a large thud.



Exactly 100 seconds before Tessa heard the sound-

Listening to the sounds of his muscles and bones going beyond their limits, Kurz reached inside his vest.

His neck was going to break any second now.

“...kuh-”

He pulled the automatic pistol out from its holster, an FN high power. Why did he have a single action gun? He quickly cocked it, pushed the muzzle against his enemy’s wrist and pulled the trigger.

Two shots. Three shots.

The spray of blood he expected never came. Instead, there were flying fragments of metal and plastic, which lightly grazed his cheek.

His grip slackened like a broken eraser. Without any relief at all yet, Kurz made to hit him with his gun, aiming at his enemy’s face- at the red, glowing slit, and continued firing the 9mm bullets. Sparks flew in front of his eyes.

There was a ‘bassh’ sound and the smell of something burning, and his opponent’s upper body was thrown back a bit.

Kurz kicked him with all his strength. It felt like kicking a hundred kilo sandbag. The enemy he was now separated from showed no sign of discomposure at all. Merciless and resolute, it came back at him, trying to kill him.

Kurz staggered and fell to his knees, gasping for breath. His body needed oxygen. His enemy's left arm came swinging down; even with its almost-severed hand dangling at the wrist... was it an artificial hand? No, that wasn't it. What in the world was this man-
“Kurz!!”

Someone flew from out of nowhere, beating the large man in the back of the head with an iron pipe.

It was Yang.

His entire body was covered in blood, the red liquid dribbling off of him from all over, but he was alive.

Thank god. But there wasn't even time to think that. The large man was indifferent to Yang's blows, and his right arm automatically went by in a flash. Yang used the pipe to shield himself, but it buckled easily and he went flying into one of the containers.

It wasn't human- they knew that much at least. No matter how many times it had been hit in the head or torso, there had been no effect at all. Kurz leapt, grabbing onto his enemy's legs, then aimed his gun at the back of its right knee. His experience from piloting ASes told him to do so. He pointed at a piece of the unyielding armor, then shot three times. Gel-like liquid and polymer parts scattered everywhere. His enemy suddenly lost its balance and collapsed to the floor.

“Yo... you.”

Without giving it a chance to retaliate, he shot it twice in the right arm joint. Then twice in its lower left side. When he had

shot it twice in the inner-left hip joint that connected to its femur, the pistol slide went back and stopped. He was out of bullets.

The “enemy”, with most of the parts connecting its limbs now destroyed, continued nevertheless to struggle with its still-moving joints, pursuing Kurz with its cracked head sensor.

“Ku... Kurz? Are you okay...?” Yang stammered, resting up against a container.

Kurz, shoulders heaving as he gasped for breath, expertly changed the magazine out in his pistol.

“Yeah, damn it all to hell... what about you? You’re covered in blood.”

“No, this is from the mountain of whole tomato cans that exploded all over the place when this guy shot ‘em. I think I blacked out for a little bit.”

“So the joke’s on me, huh?”

Of course, now that he was calm, he could tell that this wasn’t the smell of blood. However, now an entirely different problem filled his head. Why him? The whole tomatoes were ruined. It had been a narrow escape from death, but now the cook was going to kill him.

“What about Wu?”

“I don’t know. He was right next to me, but-”

“Excuse me, Sergeant; Corporal.”

Wu’s face appeared from the shadows of a large box far behind Yang. He appeared to be intact.

“I pretended to be dead and hid. I thought he looked to be a pretty dangerous character.”

“Then how ‘bout you at least yell ‘Look out!’ or something!!”

“I will from now on,” Wu smirked and scratched the back of his head.

“Anyway, what the hell was this thing... cough-”

His neck hurt tremendously. He looked, and their attacker seemed to have lost most of its motor function. It had the shape of a human being, but it was a machine. If a 3rd generation AS like the M9 were shrunk down to human size, this is probably what it would look like. Was this the life-sized AS that Kaname had encountered in Shibuya...? If he hadn't have heard her story, he probably wouldn't have been able to come up with the idea of attacking its joints like that so quickly.

“I don't understand it, either. It just suddenly jumped out of the container at us-”

Then Yang stopped. He and Kurz noticed it at the same time.

No matter the situation, would an enemy that had inflicted so much pain upon Mithril just hand these “machines” over to them so easily? And if there were a situation where they might fail, wouldn't they naturally take precautionary measures accordingly?

Exactly- and taking two, three steps back from the robot, which had suddenly stopped wriggling around, Yang mumbled, “Ku-Kurz, it's gonna-”

“-I know, run!!”

They all broke into a run at about the same time.

Moments later, a tremendous shock wave passed through as the robot exploded into flames, scattering lethal ball bearings everywhere.

“...”

White fumes and dust rose up while fragments and debris rained down.

The explosion was about on the same scale as one Claymore mine, Kurz guessed, frowning because of the ringing in his ears.

“Heeey, Kurz, are you alive?” Yang said in an easy tone of voice. It seemed they were okay, too.

“Unfortunately. Dammit, they got to us,” he cursed as he swept the burning pieces of wood off his back. The area around where the robot had exploded was in terrible shape. Steel frames were bent, containers crushed, and various cargo was going up in flames. The sprinklers activated and starting drenching everything in water.

Yang then said, “We have to report this to the Lieutenant. We don’t know what those robots really are, but there’s no mistaking it’s a trap.”

“I know- Uruz 6 to HQ! Can you hear me!?” he yelled into his radio, and Clouseau answered him right away.

“This is HQ. Did that explosion just now come from area C32?”

“Affirmative! We came across a robot like the one Angel told us about. We managed to beat it somehow, but then it self-destructed.”

“A robot? Those Amalgam bastards, huh? Damage report.”

“No deaths, three with light injuries! No hindrances to crew mobilization. The greatest loss was the whole tomatoes.”

“Was there only one enemy?”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it!? If there had been two or three of those things-” Kurz was cut off by a piercing “gashan” sound, which rang throughout the inside of the storeroom.

And in the middle of the area where they were standing- the door of one of the comparatively unharmed containers burst open. It had been *forcefully kicked out by something on the inside.*

“Wh...”



There was the sound of heavy footsteps. Trampling on the crushed door, a large man all in black stepped out of the container. It was exactly the same as the one before. Its height, garments- it even had the same inorganic facial features.

Bunn, hummed its propulsion system.

The sensor in the single slit on its head was glowing red.

“Not another one of these things...”

But unfortunately, it didn’t just stop at one.

The sound of containers breaking open continued from all around the room. One after another, the clone robots showed themselves, and slowly began to examine their surroundings.

Or perhaps it should have been called “reconnaissance”.

There were eight... no, there were more than that.

“Uruz 6, what’s wrong? Uruz 6, report.”

“Th... there are more than ten of ‘em now.”

“What did you say? Repeat it more clearly-”

“Hey, run! It’s dangerous her-” Yang and Wu tried to warn him. When he turned around, they had already broken into a headlong dash towards the exit.

Jerks.

There wasn’t even time to swear at their cold-hearted backs. The Alastors sprang at him, and, slipping through their fingers, Kurz continued after the others.



“Uruz 1 to all units. Code 13, top priority. 10 small-type ASes have appeared in the storeroom in C32. They are probably as powerful as reported. In the event that they are incapacitated, they scatter shot and self-destruct. Be careful. In accordance with protocol, lead the hostages to safety. Team Delta will move to the

corridors in C28, and Team Echo to those in C35. Subdue the enemy. Use of AP bullets is permitted. If subduing the enemy proves to be too difficult, then confine them as much as possible-”

Clouseau wasn’t shouting or yelling at a time like this. He was just giving each group their orders very composedly in a calm voice. However, the precision in his voice itself gave away the tension of the situation to his subordinates.

Each group responded to their orders, but it felt different from before; there was a feeling of anxiety.

What on earth are they trying to do... Clouseau thought to himself.

What were the robots after? Were they planning on removing all of the Mithril personnel and taking back control of the ship? No, when he thought about what Kaname Chidori had said, he didn’t believe that the robots were capable of carrying out such a delicate operation. It would be simpler than that. Then what about protecting the secret of the “vault room”? Kill all the people onboard and sink the boat- no, the robots wouldn’t be necessary for something like that. A high-power charge of about the same size would be sufficient.

What was their objective? To what extent had the enemy inferred their activities?

It was full of holes.

But it was obvious that some very powerful enemies had appeared on this ship; enemies with whom they could neither negotiate nor threaten.

One of the PRT soldiers asked, “Lieutenant, what is the enemy after?”

“We don’t know yet. This might have been a trap from the very start, or it could be a last resort... either way, the enemy is real.”

He called to Mao in the vault room over the radio.

“Uruz 2. Status report.”

“Nothing yet. At the worst, it’ll be three hours; at the best, 30 minutes. That’s about it,” she answered him quickly, the high-pitched sound of a drill whirring behind her.

“Contact me when you have a better idea, then. If it’s going to take a while, we’ll give up and pull out.”

“Understood. We’re hurrying. Over and out.”

Clouseau violently grabbed the laptop that one of his sergeants was working on, causing a cup and battery case to fall off of the table.

“I’m going to go take a look. Look after the movements of all of the teams and hostages, and give instructions. Understand-”

He looked at the ship layout projected on the 20-inch roll-up screen. He grabbed a nearby mechanical pencil and drew a heavy, black line straight across the screen- cutting off about a fourth of the back of the sketch.

“Uh...”

“This is the last line of defense. Have the hostages put behind here. Don’t let the enemy get past this line. Got it?”

“U-understood-”

Grabbing a submachine gun loaded with armor-piercing bullets instead of rubber bullets, Clouseau stepped out of the bridge.

He was worried about the hostage evacuation situation.

The storeroom where the enemies had shown up was right next to the hall where the school students were seated. He didn’t know what kind of program the robots had been given, but- What if was the type that would make them kill without discretion?

What if a killing machine of that kind were plunged into the middle of several hundred school kids?



When they heard the sound of an explosion in a nearby area, everyone from Jindai High School stopped their carefree noisemaking.

Most students asked their nearby companions, “What was that?” and exchanged confused looks.

Kyouko, who was next to Kaname, did the same. They stopped playing a game called “Scotland Yard”, which Kurz and the others had brought over from the toy store after the sea-jacking so the kids could “pass the time”, and their attention was drawn to the masked guard.

The guard was talking with someone else over the radio.

After a strange silence, the man cut through the crowd as he ran to the stage, then grabbed the mike and said, “E-excuse me... everyone, I’m sorry to interrupt your fun, but it seems we’ve had a small fire in the storeroom below us. The explosion you heard was just the cans bursting from the heat.”

The students got restless.

“Ah, it’s okay, it’s okay! Remain calm. Since there’s some smoke coming out, for the time being we’re going to move you guys to the hall on the backside of the ship where the other passengers are. Does everyone understand? See where I’m pointing?”

His index finger pointed towards the ceiling, and the crowd turned towards the stern side of the ship.

“-yes, that way. So everyone please turn that way and move out. Calmly and quietly, now. Let’s not panic, okay? You can just walk. Now, if everyone who is near the exit please-”

There was then loud racket from the direction of the kitchen.

Someone yelled, followed by the clatter of pots and pans falling on the floor, then the commotion of the cooks running noisily out of the kitchen. Kaname and the others, still only spectators at this point, saw Kurz come out behind the rest.

“Ah, Sergeant... er, no, not sergeant, um, okay, everyone! Look this way. It’s okay, everyone just slowly evaca-”

“No no no no no!!” Kurz shouted, cutting the other guy off. “Hurry up! Run! Right now! It doesn’t matter if you fall down, just run! Do you wanna die!? What’re ya just standing around for!? Hurry up and run!!”

He violently pushed one of the nearby schoolboys in the back, then aimed his pistol at the ceiling and fired. The several hundred students, who had been standing there blankly, started to scream and rush in a frenzy towards the exits. Even the principal and staff, who should have been reprimanding such chaos, just stood there looking very pale.

“Ka- Kaname...!!” Kyouko cried as she was carried off by the sudden wave of people.

“It’s okay! We’ll meet up later!” Kaname yelled out finally. She watched until she could no longer see Kyouko, then, in the middle of the mayhem, fought the current and rushed over to Kurz. “Hey, Kurz!? What’s the meaning of this!? Are you serious!?”

“Those robots you told us about are here!” he yelled to her over the noise, “and there’s not just one, but more than ten of ‘em! They almost killed us in the storeroom, and they’ll be here any minute now. Anyway, we have to get everyone out of here!”

“Wh...”

Was he talking about those machines called Alastors? Why were they here? Did that mean that Leonard was somehow involved in this incident?

She shook off the various questions that had flooded her mind for a moment, then drew closer.

“Bu... but this is madness! Someone’ll get hurt like thi-”

“Better than being dead... hey, you!” he turned around and yelled at one of his colleagues, “give me your P90s and all your AP bullets! Get all the stragglers and evacuate to the back of the ship! Team Golf will provide backup, okay!?”

“R-roger, Sergeant.”

“Protect the hostages at all costs. As always, be calm and collected. If you got it, then hurry!”

The Mithril man tossed the Belgian-made new model submachine gun and magazine filled with armor-piercing bullets to Kurz and turned around. He urged the upset Jindai teachers and students on, and helped a girl student who had fallen down back up.

Kurz checked the magazine like a true professional, and while operating the selector, yelled out over the radio, “Uruz 9, what’s happening over there!? ...okay, somehow manage to hold that corridor for another three minutes...huh- I don’t know, think of something!”

He turned the radio off and glanced at Kaname.

“What are you doing? You need to run, too.”

“W-will you guys be okay? I mean, those robots have superhuman strength, and can pick up someone easily...”

Kurz gave her an ironic smile.

“Yeah, we’ve discovered that already. Your information saved us, though. So hurry now.”

“A... okay. Be careful.”

Kaname didn't linger any longer. She turned around away from the kitchen- and hurried towards the exit.

It happened suddenly.

Without any warning at all, there was thunderous roar and the ceiling overhead burst open.

Pieces of building material and dust poured down, and something large fell into the hall. No- rather, it *landed*.

One of the girl students who had fallen behind let out a high-pitched scream.

“Eh...”

It silently picked itself up off of the crushed floor, the red sensor on its head staring at the nearby girl.

The hotel district two months ago- the scene that had happened there in the pouring rain came vividly back to Kaname. How the robot had dealt with that assassin. One strike with those arms would probably break the girl's delicate body.

“Run! Hurry!” Kaname warned, running to her, but the girl didn't move. She was frozen in fear and surprise. It was a girl in the class next to hers, but she couldn't remember her name. The Alastor moved closer to her.

The robot didn't look ready to attack right away, though. While bending down, it examined the girl- who had about the same build as Kaname- up and down, and looked into her face.

But there wasn't time to ponder on this. Without any regard for her own safety, Kaname shoved the girl away from the Alastor.

“Aaah...”

“I said run!”

The enemy half-turned towards her, its black coat flapping around as it moved. There was a humming sound as the servomotor in the inner part of the red sensor adjusted its focus.

The robot was exactly like the ones she had seen before- but now she could see much more if it.

Its bulky chest. And huge arms.

Even the pro-wrestlers she had seen a long time ago from ringside seats looked like school kids compared to it.

“...”

Overwhelmed, she stepped backed aimlessly.

Its inorganic face filled her vision.

Behind her, Kurz was shouting something. He was about 20 meters away. She didn't realize it just then, but she was standing in the way of Kurz's shot.

“Kaname, don't move!”

Immediately after he yelled that, there were gunshots. She felt a tiny breeze go right between her thighs, and the Alastor was hit three or four times in the right leg, causing it to lose its balance. Kaname's skirt fluttered somewhat belatedly.

“...!?”

The bullets had passed through the small gap between Kaname's legs. It was absolutely amazing marksmanship, but Kaname just went deathly pale.

She started to turn around to yell, “What'd you do that for!?", but there wasn't any time for that. Although the Alastor was unsteady, it unexpectedly reached out for her. It seemed that the shots to the leg hadn't done enough damage.

“Hya...”

It grabbed a hold of the ribbon on her chest and pulled her with all its might. The air arbitrarily escaped out of her lungs, and she let out a hysterical scream.

“Chidori!!”

Gunfire. A bullet hit the left side of the Alastor's head as its gaze fixed on Kaname. There was a "gakun" sound and its head turned to the right.

The person who had just shot it was Sousuke. He and two of his colleagues dressed in combat uniforms ran in from the exit leading towards the front of the ship.

He shot again, hitting the Alastor continuously in the left side of its body. There was debris of body fibers and plastic, then sparks flying everywhere.

"Ah ow ow ow ow ow!"

Kaname, who was in a panic because of the point-blank impact, was tossed aside; then the robot pointed its left arm straight at Sousuke and fired its internal rifle. The bullets missed and hit the pillar behind him. Its bad aim was probably due to being shot; however, that seemed to be its only injury. The Alastor crouched down; then took off, zigzagging with unimaginable speed for such a large body.

"Sousuke!?" Kaname yelled as she fell to her hips.

The Alastor drew in close to Sousuke, its hand coming down like sword. Sousuke narrowly evaded the blow while at the same time roughly aiming at the Alastor, then fired full-auto at pointblank range. The sound of rapid fire filled the room as it pounded against the robot's upper body.

It wasn't working.

The Alastor's movements were somewhat awkward, yet quick. It was frighteningly bulletproof. Lightly stepping to the left, the enemy rotated around. Its coat flew up like an umbrella, and it did a late, violent, reverse roundhouse kick on Sousuke.

"Ugh!" Sousuke quickly pulled his gun up to shield himself just as the heavy blow hit him and sent him flying. Making his way beside them, Kurz ran out and fired his machine gun.

Even as it was being bombarded with bullets, the Alastor managed to jump- it jumped unfathomably high and far, just like the 3rd generation ASes. No- this robot was smaller version of those ASes in the first place. It surpassed the motility and power of humans.

If the situation were being fought with ASes, it would be comparable to one M9 doing battle with four Rk-92 Savages. They would find it difficult to bring it down without damage.

The enemy fired its internal gun again. There was the heavy sound of the gunshot as it hit one of their colleagues right in the chest, knocking him over. He didn't even scream.

“Don’t stop, keep firing!” Sousuke yelled, throwing away his worn-out submachine gun and grabbing his pistol. Kurz and the rest fired incessantly, pouring bullets into the Alastor.

Fragments scattered everywhere. There was the dull sound of impact. Dinnerware on top of the tables was smashed by the flying bullets.

And yet the enemy continued to move. It was almost impossible to aim for its weak joints with the way it was moving.

“Damn it!”

Sousuke dropped to his knees, single-mindedly firing his automatic pistol. Kurz changed the magazine out in his submachine gun and continued firing. They dodged the robot’s attacks, shooting at it at point-blank range.

Over and over again, it charged. They looked like matadors.

There was nothing Kaname could do except stay down behind a fallen table, covering her head with her hands.

They shot it no telling how many times, and finally, the Alastor’s movements slowed down. They shot it in the joints, and its knees snapped. Sousuke and the others surrounded the robot,

mercilessly pumping it full of bullets, as if it were a weakened and cornered animal.

It definitely could not be called an “elegant” fight. It differed from the few gunfights Kaname had seen before in that it had been quite an ugly display of force- one where they had used all of the ammunition and firepower they had to force out a win.

Sousuke and the others weren’t weak; their opponent just wouldn’t have gone down any other way.

Finally, the enemy stopped moving.

When she looked, the hall was completely empty, and she could no longer see any of the other students around. It seemed that even the girl she had pushed earlier made her way out, as well.

“Whew...”

But Kaname was the only one breathing a sigh of relief.

“Run! It’s going to self-destruct!”

“S-self-destruct...?”

“Chidori! Why are you still here!? Run!”

Sousuke grabbed Kaname’s arm as she hastily tried to stand up and ran. He was so rough it surprised her. Kurz and one of the others had already picked up their companion who had been shot and, carrying him between them, hurriedly ran off.

“Get down!” Kurz yelled. Sousuke pushed Kaname down, throwing himself on top of her. A moment later, the Alastor exploded.

Fragments and gunshot scattered out, making numerous holes in the walls, ceiling and light fixtures. The shock beat against their skulls, and a dull pain ran up through their eardrums.

Smoked covered the area. The sprinklers activated and rained all throughout the hall.

“Are you hurt, Chidori?”

“...you’re heavy.”

“Sorry.”

Sousuke moved, and Kaname rose up. The water poured down, and droplets of water dripped from his forelocks.

“Can you stand?”

“Yeah... thanks,” Kaname nodded, and tried to stand up. Her knees were shaking, and she didn’t do very well. Without saying anything, Sousuke supported her. He smelled like sweat.

“Kurz, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Howard’s alive, too. Looks like it hit him in the body armor. It might have cracked some ribs, though.”

“I... I’m fine, Sergeant.”

It seemed that even the person who had been shot earlier was also okay. From the other side of the clearing smoke, they could see the shadows of people as they rose up and coughed violently.

There was the sound of dinnerware falling from the direction of the kitchen, then the faint sound of heavy footsteps echoing off the walls. The sound of many footsteps. There could be two, or even three-

“More are coming...”

“A place with this of clear view won’t be good for an ambush. Let’s retreat and contact the Lieutenant. Chidori, can you run?”

“Y-yeah.”

Then everyone ran out of the hall in a hurry.

They left the hall, going down one of the corridors leading to the back of the ship. There wasn’t the feeling that they were being pursued, but Sousuke and the others kept a lookout in every direction nonetheless. Even above them. They didn’t know where an enemy might appear.

They heard the sounds of heavy gunfire from far-off. It seemed that another team was doing battle with them.

“They’re formidable,” Sousuke said, walking quickly.

“Isn’t that the truth? I barely survived one high-powered round with those things. I was lucky,” Kurz replied.

“You said that there’s another ten close by. This is bad. They aren’t indestructible, but our firepower isn’t enough. We don’t have enough ammunition, either. If we have to fight against them full on, there will definitely be injuries. And we won’t be able to protect the hostages.”

“Yeah, damn it all. What’re they after? If they want to kill everyone, then-”

“I don’t think it’s that,” Kaname said. “I don’t think they’re out to kill everyone. I think it’s something else.”

“How can you be so sure? I was attacked all of the sudden down in the storeroom, no questions asked.”

“That’s...”

Vague thoughts raced around in Kaname’s mind, gradually coming together to make a clear picture.

The robot’s stagnate behavior. What was the same and what was different? What was the focus of the dispute on this ship in the first place? Of course, it was what was in that vault room, no, it wasn’t.

It wasn’t that at all.

She stopped and looked up in the direction of the hall.

“The target’s physique...”

“Huh?”

“Think about it...the robot didn’t rush to attack a girl who’s probably 165 centimeters tall and weighs maybe 50 kilos^{*2}. If it finds girls who fit this category, then it scans the details of the face next. And not just the outer appearance, either, but the build, blood

vessels, and retina patterns, too. If those match up with my data, then it moves onto the next routine, which is probably to guard me while escaping- or kill everyone other than the target.”

There wasn’t a trace of the usual oblivious high school girl left in her face. Sousuke and Kurz’s eyes grew as they watched her logically explain everything.

“When it grabbed me, Sousuke shot it, right? Don’t you think that was strange?”

Sousuke, who had been caught off guard by Kaname’s sudden change in demeanor, came back to himself and nodded.

“...it certainly was odd. It pushed you out of the way. If it had used logical fighting tactics, it would have used you as a shield.”

“Hey, hey, wait a minute, now. Are you saying that Kaname’s their target?”

“Probably... actually, I have no doubt that I am. The Captain had his eye on me from the very beginning, right?”

“Well, if that’s so, then what’ll we do about it? Stand you in front of us while we fight those metal puppets?”

Sousuke gave Kurz a dark look.

“Using Chidori as a shield is out of the question.”

“I know that, it was just a joke. Anyway, it’s dangerous here. Getting out should be our first priority.”

“Wait a minute,” Kaname stopped Kurz as he was about to run on ahead, “I can’t be a shield, but I could be the bait. Actually, there really is no other choice, given the situation.”

When Sousuke heard these words, his brow wrinkled up.

“No, it’s too dangerous. The enemy may not be able to lay a hand on you directly, but it’s likely that you could accidentally be hit by a stray bullet or something.”

“Well, just getting here wasn’t exactly a walk in the park, either! Everyone’s involved in this mess now, aren’t they!?”

That’s right. This is bad. There were still a lot of those dangerous robots on the ship, and even though it seemed they were able to get everyone from school to safety, they were still on the same ship, after all. Sooner or later, something terrible was going to happen. Many people would get hurt, or even die.

And it would be none other than her own fault.

She absolutely could not permit that. They had to stop it somehow.

“Please. If something were to happen to anyone from school, I couldn’t face them ever again. Is what I’m asking so unreasonable?”

“...”

Sousuke gave a hard look at Kaname’s urgent face. He didn’t want to put her in danger, no matter what the cost. There was impatience and hesitation, indecision and doubt. After brushing all of them to the side, he finally shook his head and gave a small sigh.

“...fine, I’ll explain to the Lieutenant. Let’s get out of here for now, though.”

Sousuke turned on his radio.



The sounds of unceasing gunfire resounded through the second deck starboard-side corridor as Clouseau ran through. The Echo team, under the command of Sergeant Roger Sandarapta, was attacking the enemy.

“Roger, report,” he called out to the large Native American, who was kneeling down by the wall at the intersection and changing the magazine out in his rifle.

“Two units. 2 heavy casualties, 0 dead. Focusing fire on the heads, but we will be out of ammunition soon,” he said almost like an AI on an M9.

They seemed to have stopped them somehow thanks to the straight and narrow corridors. The enemies were hiding in the doorway of one of the guestrooms facing them, and if they showed even just a fraction of their heads, the soldiers would start raining bullets mercilessly in their direction.

“Lieutenant, the enemy is tough. They’re like wild buffaloes, but smart enough to let the bullets go by.”

“Can you take them down?”

“If there’s only two of them, we should be able to. But we don’t have enough ammunition.”

And it looked like they had run out of support, Clouseau recognized. And that’s what the always-objective Roger was saying, as well. However, *it*, which they had on standby in case their equipment wasn’t enough, wouldn’t be helpful at all in a place like this.

They should probably lead the passengers and crew to the lifeboats, but the front part of the ship was already a danger zone. Getting everyone off of the ship now would be next to impossible. He was also worried about Captain Testarossa’s whereabouts. If she were in the front part of the ship, she would be in danger. He had a mountain of things that he wanted her advice on-

When he realized he was looking for someone else to depend on, he shook his head at himself.

No, he couldn’t do that. He was the one in charge. He couldn’t look anxious in front of his subordinates.

“Buy some time and retreat slowly.”

“Roger.”

He then received a communication. It was from Sousuke.

“What is it?”

“We have a proposal.”

Sousuke briefly explained what Kaname had said, suggesting several different plans.

“Use her as bait? It’s dangerous. And how would you gather those things up from around the ship?”

“She’s saying that there should be a data link function. If we carefully offer them the bait, then the enemy will contact the others and tell them to gather in that area.”

“The girl says that?”

“You only know what you’ve read about her in the reports, but it’s best not to underestimate her potential. If you consider that-”

Just then, someone broke in.

“What are you jabbering about!?”

It was the voice of a young woman. She had probably snatched Sousuke’s mike. For the first time, Clouseau was hearing the voice of Kaname Chidori.

“Hurry up and give permission or orders or whatever! If something happens to anyone from my school, I’ll make you sorry, got it!? You stupid old man!”

Who the hell is she calling ‘old man’ without seeing him first? He thought this, but he just said in a calm voice, “Okay, I got it. So let me talk to him again.”

“You do get it, right? Are you sure!?”

“Just hurry up!”

Sousuke returned.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I can’t really stop her in such matters...”

“Don’t worry about it- it actually eases my conscience a little. We’re going to do as she wants.”

He felt like they were left no choice but to grasp at straws. Talking loudly so as to be heard over the gunshots, Clouseau discussed the detailed plan with Sousuke.

After they had finished and he had ended the communication, Clouseau muttered to himself, “Really, where did they come up with ‘Angel’ for her?”



December 24th, 23:24 (Japan Standard Time)
1 kilometer from the Pacific Chrysalis, Underwater
Tuatha de Danaan

“Con, sonar. New contact from 0-8-3, direction of the tow array,” Sergeant Dejileny informed Commander Richard Mardukas from the sonar room.

“...no wait, the sphere array is picking it up as well. Assigning Mike 13 to target. Distance is... hm? This is strange; very strange indeed.”

Inside the command center, acting-Captain Mardukas stood next to the empty Captain’s chair. He made a grim face.

Added on top of everything else, he was worried about the situation on that cruise ship. It seemed bad enough that the Captain’s whereabouts were unknown while everyone else was being attacked by mysterious enemies. He was also worried about the movements of the Japanese patrol boats passing by only four miles away. But in spite of all that, when it came to this sonar operator...

“Make your report clear and brief, you idiot-”

“Quiet! I can’t concentrate!” Dejileny reproached him.
“...it’s not a ship. It’s underwater... above the thermo cline. And-
it’s going incredibly fast. Over 50 knots...!?”*3

“A torpedo!? Battle stations!”

A wave of tension swept through the command center all at once. The deck officers hit the alarm buzzers and announced the warning to the rest of the ship. The sea chart on the front screen displayed a yellow marker, which indicated the target.

“No! We would have seen it sooner if it were a torpedo!
The characteristics are completely different- this is a submarine!
Damn it, we’ve detected another two ships! Assigning Mike 14
and 15 to the targets! Estimated distance 10 miles and
approaching!”

It couldn’t be. You could search the entire world, but you wouldn’t find a ship other than the *Tuatha de Danaan* that could go faster than 50 knots. But Dejileny had never once been mistaken in his analyses so far. Even Mardukas recognized that.

Were they enemies?

That was a stupid question. Of course they were.

Mardukas took a deep breath.

“Contact the ground unit, then cut the communication cables. Turn to port, course 1-0-5, speed, 30 knots! Bottom rudder 20 degrees, depth, 200! We’re about to enter ASW!”*4



December 24th, 23:25 (Japan Standard Time)
15 km East of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, Underwater

There was the high-pitched sound of the super-conductive propulsion system firing and the resulting turbulence. Cutting

through the pitch-black water, the three “Leviathan” ships came around, going at a speed that no existing normal ship could match.

“Shark 1 to all ships. It seems the TDD-1 has noticed us. We’ve stopped staying alongside the *Pacific Chrysalis*, and have changed course to 1-0-5,” said the man piloting “Shark 1”, one of the Leviathan ships.

A normal submarine traveling at high speed would not be able to perform decent reconnaissance because of its own noise, but his boat was different. He was already collecting the information from the scattered sonar buoys in the area without changing speed at all, and was about to find out the exact location of the enemy ship.

“Shark 2, roger. Capturing that ship will go exactly as planned...”

“Shark 3, roger. What a mediocre Captain. It doesn’t look like he realizes the difference between his abilities and ours,” said the two wingmen following a few hundred yards behind.

These vessels, which had completely turned the concept of what a submarine was upside down, often used tactical aircraft terminology. Actually, the concept of the Leviathan, plan 0601, would be better called “Underwater Fighter Crafts”.

There were only two crewmembers per ship. It was an entirely new weapons platform, using the operating technology of Arm Slaves, which would close in on the target at high speed and deliver an unavoidable blow. It could also be seen in close combat. The purpose of these “units” was to quickly bring down a slow vessel carrying several hundred people using their unparalleled mobility.

It was a streamlined vessel; its shape suggested the idea of a throwing knife. Its outward appearance looked like a scaled-down *Tuatha de Danaan*, but there were close combat fighting

arms on both sides. The Leviathan was capable of grabbing its target and wielding a monomolecular cutter against it.

So far, the ships that had gone up against these machines, whose marine battleground was predominated by ASes, had no way of opposing them. They had already sunk Indian and Soviet submarines in combat tests, as well as a few merchant ships.

All of them had been treated like accidents, but the people on the targeted vessels probably had not even known anything other than they had been attacked and killed.

The Shark fleet, which piloted the Leviathans, had yet to meet with very tough targets. Especially Shark 1, whose captain had originally been a sailor on one of England's elite submarines. He had quit his original path of one day becoming a submarine captain because of his superior officer's high-handedness, but now he was in charge of the world's most powerful underwater vessel. He was very grateful to Amalgam, which had given him this ship.

The *Tuatha de Danaan* would probably be his greatest trophy. According to the information, the female captain of his only really formidable enemy wasn't on the ship. The hunt wouldn't be difficult.

Perhaps the one commanding that ship now would be him. That incompetent, nervous officer, who had made his life a living hell. The time had come to finally teach that bastard a lesson.

"I'll show you..." He gave a secret, cruel smile from inside the cramped cockpit. "Now, as we planned, come at it from three sides... Break!"

The three ships, which formed a V-shape in the dark waters, deployed in three directions at the signal. They changed direction as sharply as a bird of prey. From the viewpoint of the Leviathans, their target's movements were incredibly slow and helpless.



December 24th, 23:27 (Japan Standard Time)
The Casino on the Pacific Chrysalis

“...now?” Souseki whispered into his radio from the corner of the casino while aiming his Belgian-made submachine gun. The water from the sprinklers in the hall was now pouring down like rain.

“...not yet,” Kaname, who was drenched from head to toe, said in a shaky voice.

She was standing about a dozen meters away from the roulette wheel, with one of the Alastors standing directly in front of her. It was close enough that it would be able to knock her down with a single bound.

“Not yet. I’ll know when it’s a sure thing, so don’t interfere. Don’t worry.”

“But what if you’re wrong? Isn’t this enough? Get away from that thing, Chidori.”

“I’m saying this ‘cause it’s not enough...!” she said, raising her voice. Even Souseki, who had the Alastor in his sight from a distance, heard it without the radio.

The robot drew closer to Kaname. Slowly.

All the Alastor had to do to tear Kaname in half was just step forward a few paces and attack. The sensor glowed dimly within its hood. Its gaze was focused straight on Kaname.

Souseki had been involved in numerous bait operations, but this time, even though he kept fighting the impulse to pull the trigger, he was desperate.

But she’s completely new at this.

What if that iron scrap heap hit her with all its strength across the head? What if it used the rifle in its arm to take her out? It could just grab her by the throat and twist lightly-

He was surprised to find himself imagining these kinds of things.

Kaname had been in the middle of several battles already. So why did he always get like this? Whenever she was put in a dangerous situation, Sousuke would lose his cool. His feelings would flare up, and his blood would boil. But he didn't get like this when it was one of his fellow soldiers.

Why?

He squinted. Through the haze of the light rain, he could see Kaname standing completely still in front of the Alastor; the water dripping down the side of her face, and her slender shoulders shivering slightly. The dim, white lights shone over her.

Looking at her almost symbolic figure, he suddenly realized something. It was completely abrupt, out-of-place and unexpected.

There was no logic to it. It was because she was special.

He thought she was strong. He thought she was beautiful. He wanted to protect her.

Peace, hope, and longing. All three were synonyms for her.

He wanted her for himself. He couldn't stand for anyone else to do as they pleased with her. Especially the enemy.

Well, he was here, now, feeling that way. That fact in and of itself was enough.

He finally understood-

Her voice interrupted his epiphany.

“Ah... wait. Huh...? Tessa? I’m kind of busy at the moment-”

“Huh...? What is it, Chidori?”

The tone of her voice suddenly changed, and over the radio, she mumbled, “I’m sorry, Miss Kaname. The situation is... well, dangerous. But, well... I understand. I’ll leave it to you-”

What was she saying?

It was strange- like that time in the Lady Chapel in the depths of the *de Danaan*. She spoke like a completely different person- no, like Tessa, having a conversation with someone.

But Sousuke didn’t get the chance to wonder about it any longer than that. Kaname soon came back to herself, then yelled out, “Now, Sousuke!”

In his sight, Sousuke saw as the robot tried to reach out for Kaname.

He shot without any hesitation. It hit, and the enemy turned in Sousuke’s direction. Kurz started an all out gunfight from the other direction.

“Run!” Sousuke yelled as he pulled the pin out of a flash grenade.



Even though he was handling all sorts of problems, Clouseau found himself in a dire situation. From the evacuation of the hostages, giving orders to his subordinates, dealing with the enemies that were coming after them, not being able to contact the ship, and the situation with the vault room, they just kept coming, one right after another-

“Team Golf, retreat from E13 to E15, as slowly as you can. Don’t give up the path to E14. Gebo 9, nothing on Santa Claus yet? Leading Kano 6 is your top priority-” he instructed as he fired.

The empty ammunition cartridge that his gun spit out fell to the floor, and the smell of gunpowder filled the corridor. The black

shadow on the other side of the hallway quickly jumped back, hiding behind the corner.

Damn it...

That bastard robot. It's trying to make me use up all my bullets, isn't it?

It was learning.

Just then, he received the transmission he had been hoping for. It was Tessa. She was using the on-board telephone in the ladies' restroom, and the communication was patched through from the radio in the bridge.

"Uruz 1, this is Ansuz. Report."

"Captain? Where have you been? That passenger-"

Tessa quickly cut him off in a hushed voice.

"I'm still with him. When there's time, I'll tell you about it. You don't need to worry about him. Anyway, those robots have shown up, haven't they?"

"Yes, ma'am. Probably more than 10 of them."

"Go to where Angel's mission is."

How did she know about that? She hadn't been able to contact them up till now- but Clouseau didn't have the time to wonder further.

"However, have Team Golf stand by in G10. Since there will be a hole in the perimeter right there, Corporal Yang will be better equipped than you to handle it. Those robots are more cunning than you guys think."

The sound of her commanding voice, which Clouseau was hearing for the first time, stopped all of his doubts. Since he could think about all this stuff later, for now she was his superior officer worthy of his trust.

She then fired off a line of questions at him in rapid succession.

“What about the hostages’ evacuation?”

“Almost complete.”

“Captain Harris?”

“We haven’t been able to locate him yet.”

“The vault?”

“We haven’t been able to open it yet.”

“The *de Danaan*? ”

For a moment, Clouseau didn’t know what to say.

That’s right. That was what else he had to worry about after those robots.

“They told me ‘Three super-high speed underwater ships capable of going 50 knots are approaching. Their objective is probably sinking the *de Danaan*. The head ship is moving to attack right now.’ Right now the Commander has taken command of the ship.”

Like most ground soldiers, Clouseau was an amateur where submarine battle was concerned. But the enemy that the *de Danaan* was going up against was dangerous- he understood that much.

And there were three of them. This was the greatest threat that the *de Danaan* had faced since its commission. And the one who had brought the ship through the many crises it had faced had been none other than the child prodigy, Teletha Testarossa.

But she wasn’t there right now. She couldn’t give orders or advice.

It’s a hopeless battle...

It was pretty clear that with such an undistinguished commander in charge, that it would be very-

“It seems there’s no choice but to leave it to him,” Tessa said in a persistently calm voice.

“Yes. However, the Commander-”

“Mr. Clouseau. Do you know what Commander Mardukas was called during his time in the Royal Navy?”

“No ma’am...”

“He was called ‘The Duke’. His ship was peaceful. His tactics were cool-headed. An invincible submariner who played the field like a chessboard. He has been decorated several times for secret combat situations that have no documentation left. There isn’t anyone who has fought underwater that hasn’t heard of ‘The Duke’.”

“That’s the Commander?”

“Did you think he was just another nagging technicality monger?” Tessa said in a cheerful voice, despite the emergency situation. “I have heard that when it comes time for him to really get down to business, ‘The Duke’ has a small habit. Unfortunately, I’ve never even seen it myself, but perhaps some of my crew will get to see it today.”



About the Same Time The Tuatha de Danaan

For the first time in six years, Richard Mardukas performed this habit.

With the fingertips on his right hand, he grabbed the brim of his hat. The left hand did the same to the back. He slowly turned the hat 180 degrees, until his hands had finally changed positions-

The switch was complete.



“Ladies and gentlemen, this is battle,” Richard Mardukas informed them as his squinted eyes ran across the screen. “It looks like the enemy thinks we are its prey. Big, sluggish prey. However, we’re going to make them see who the real prey is in this. Our lady of a warship is the dominating queen of death here in the deep.”

He paused for a moment.

“FCO, report.”

“FCO! ADSLMM one and two, loaded!”

“Load all of the MVLS with the ‘maglocks’.”

“Aye, Sir. Loading all of the MVLS with maglocks.”

“Maneuvering, set course 2-0-5 to port.”

“Aye, Sir. Setting course 2-0-5 to port.”

“FCO. On my signal, open doors on tubes one and two.”

“Aye, Sir. Ready.”

“Maneuvering, suspend EMFC, and slow down your advance. Sonar room- let me know when there’s cavitation.”

“Aye, Sir.”

Then everything became a mysterious spell that only they understood. A battle ritual held by priests in ancient times. Those clusters of words woke up the enormous, sleeping power in the ship.

The sonar room reported, “Con, sonar... cavitation in estimated five seconds. 2, 1... cavitating!”

“Open doors one and two.”

“Aye, opening doors one and two.”

“Uh... Commander, we are in full view of the enemy,” said the deck officer, Lieutenant Godart, uneasily.

“They’ve been able to see us. Tubes one and two, fire.”

“Aye. ADSLMM, fire one. Fire two.”

The self-propelled mines launched from the torpedo tubes. They were weapons that silently made their way to the set

coordinates, then quietly waited for the enemy- but their top speed was 20 knots, which was one-third the speed of the enemy.

Things were going well because the smart mines they fired were masked by the noise caused by the *de Danaan*'s high speed, which occurred when it disabled the EMFC (electromagnetic fluid control)- but the course of the mines was completely different from the enemy's path.

"Keep going like this. After 20 seconds, activate the EMFC at Lieutenant Dean's signal. After that, continue forward at one-third power, decelerating to 20 knots."

"Commander, if we do that, then the enemy's attacks will—" the navigation officer said.

"There isn't time, Lieutenant Dean."

"A... aye, Sir. EMFC, on my mark. 5, 4, 3- contact."

"Contact. EMFC, activating," the AMC officer replied. The turbulence noise around the ship was hidden by the electromagnetic power of the EMFC.

"That's good. However, the enemy still sees us. Sonar room, keep your ears open."

"Aye, Sir."

"Course 2-9-5, depth, 120. Up-angle, 20 degrees."

"Aye, Sir. Course, 2-9-5, depth, 120. Up-angle, 20 degrees," Mardukas commanded, and his subordinates read the orders back.

Mardukas, without smiling as the reports were obediently given, said quietly, "Very well. Ladies and gentleman, we can't be deceived by the enemy's speed. Impatience leads to irreversible error. Enjoy this moment."



The Pacific Chrysalis

After she finished giving directions to Clouseau and left the ladies' restroom, Tessa found Sailor standing right in front of her.

"You're late," he growled at her, but his tone was strangely quiet.

Right now, since the two of them were in the lower layer of the front side of the ship, there wasn't anyone else around. Ever since the explosion they heard earlier, there had been the sound of furious gunfire in the distance.

When he had heard the gunshots, Sailor made a fuss saying, "The Navy Special Forces have rushed in! But it's too early- in a two-hour movie, this would be about the 60 minute mark. They'll get annihilated for sure, if we don't go to save them."

Expressly letting an unreasonable soldier such as this one plunge into a danger zone was too thoughtless. It was for that reason that Tessa kept stalling, give him all sorts of excuses. Every time he would become instantly irritated, but-

"I-I'm sorry you had to wait. Well, then, shall we go?"
Tessa said nonchalantly.

"We'll go later," he replied.

"Huh? Is there a problem?"

His impetuousness had settled down a while ago. His face darkened, glaring at Tessa with a serious expression.

"I may not look it, but my hearing is pretty good. I can't say that I heard everything, but I did catch some stuff. Who were you talking to?"

"...!"

Submachine gun in hand, Sailor stepped closer to Tessa.

"You mentioned 'The Duke', as well as his real name. How does an ordinary maid like you know Mr. Mardukas?"

“Umm, well...”

“He’s the man who saved the submarine I was serving on back when I was a deck officer. While on an operation in the Barents Sea, there was an accident and we were attacked by the Soviet Navy and almost sank. The one who saved us was the Captain of the nuclear submarine, the *Turbulent*- ‘The Duke’. After the affair had been settled, my Captain- Commander Testarossa, was grateful, respectful, joked with him, and gave him a hat like ours with the *Turbulent*’s insignia on it.”

Tessa was stunned by his words, so much so that she forgot the precariousness of her situation. This meant that Sailor had been one of her late father’s subordinates. And Mardukas had been friends with her father, as well.

Mardukas had never mentioned this to her at all.

“I heard that he became an executive for a shipping company after he retired, but- what were you talking about? Is he on this ship? I don’t understand- there’s a lot you’re hiding from me, isn’t there!?”

“O-of course there’s one or two things that a girl would hide- umm, could you please not put your face so close? You smell like a cigar.”

Tessa turned away from Sailor, who was now snorting violently, with a look of suffocation.

“Don’t screw with me! Just who are you!? If you don’t speak up now, I’ll tie you up and throw you in the men’s bathroom!”

He seemed to be serious. She didn’t even have the time to be strangely disturbed. It probably would be best if she just explained to him her position and the basic situation, then ask for his cooperation. Even though everyone else was having such a hard time, the fact that she herself was spending forever in some

weird comedy with this middle-aged man would most certainly stick to her reputation for a long time in the squad.

That being said-

“You probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“That’s for me to decide! So spill it already, everything ASAP!”

“Well... the truth is, I’m a submarine Captain, just like you.”

“I’m being serious here!”

“See? I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Of course not! Are you an agent for the CIA or some other organization? If you’re trying to steal the credit for this from me-”

Then he stopped.

At the head of the gloomy corridor stood a large man wearing a hooded coat. Pale light glowed from the thin slit in its head.

“...!”

Tessa knew what the robot was at first glance. It must have managed to slip through Clouseau’s defenses to get this far.

The Alastor silently approached them. One step, then another.

“Eh? Who are you? What’s that on your face? Hey, stop right there. Can’t you see this!?”

Sailor pointed his submachine gun loaded with rubber bullets at it.

“No, don’t! Throw away your gun!” Tessa yelled as she grabbed for the gun- but she was too late. In response to Sailor’s hostile action, the robot suddenly leaned over and pointed its internal left-arm rifle at them.

“Ah-”

The enemy fired. It was his good luck that Tessa’s leap knocked him off-balance. At that moment, three bullets passed

right by Sailor's head, hitting the wall behind him and scattering sparks everywhere.



“Wha!?”

Bnnn... its propulsion system hummed. Without firing anymore than that, the enemy rushed them, coat flapping.

Tessa immediately put herself in between the robot and Sailor. Based on what she knew from her “resonance” with Kaname, she guessed that the robot wouldn’t be after her.

“Run aw-”

She didn’t even have time to breathe before the Alastor had brought its right arm up across her tiny frame, hitting her into the wall. It was probably taking it easy on her, but- even so, for a small girl like Tessa, it was a terrible blow.

She felt the wind get knocked out of her. Everything went black, and she couldn’t tell up from down or right from left anymore.

She could hear Sailor yell out as he started firing wildly. Countless numbers of rubber bullets bounced off the walls and rained over Tessa as she fell face down on the floor.

“Uh...”

Her head spinning, she shook her head a little as she raised herself up; she then found that the enemy had its bulky arm wrapped around Sailor’s throat.

“Guh, agagagagaga...!!”

“Mr. Sailor!? Stop it! Stop!”

Tessa got up and grabbed onto the robot’s arm, dangling from it. But no matter how they tried hitting it or scratching it, the robot took no notice of either of their attempts to harm it.

“I’m... gonna die...”

“Stop it, please!!” Tessa cried, and then- the robot loosened its grip.

“...kah ho!”

Sailor pushed himself away from the Alastor's chest for dear life. He and Tessa stumbled and fell down, but their opponent didn't attack them after that.

"Eh...?"

"Cough... up-kuh...!"

Appearing to have completely lost interest in them, the Alastor slowly looked up at the ceiling back behind them, in the direction of the upper deck at the front of the ship.

In the next instant, the robot suddenly turned around and leapt, breaking through the ceiling. Bits and pieces of plasterboard and pipe rained down as dust enveloped the area. There was only a gaping hole above them after that.

It was gone.

Did its architect program it to listen to her entreaties? No, that couldn't be it. He wasn't that type of person anymore.

If that was the case- then the feint was a success.

Miss Kaname, Mr. Sagara... please do your best, she prayed deep within her heart.

Sailor finally stopped coughing and started cursing.

"Ehh... what in the hell was that!? That bastard's unbelievably strong... cough."

"Are you okay, Mr. Sailor?"

"Not at all! What's happening on this ship!? What the hell are those things!? And who are you!?"

"That's..."

He's involved this far, now. Time to just go ahead and tell him everything- she thought, but as soon as she did she heard someone else's voice.

"That girl is the Captain of the 'Toy Box', Sir. The leader of the terrorists."

They turned around to find Captain Harris standing there. He was holding a German-made automatic revolver.

Sailor gave a dubious look from beside the solemn Tessa.

“Captain. Where have you been hiding? Also... what did you say just now? The Captain? Of the ‘Toy Box’? Leader? This girl? I don’t understand all of this nonsense.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t enough time to explain, and that I’ll need to leave you here.”

Harris fired nonchalantly. Immediately following the sound of the dry gunshot, Sailor dropped down heavily to the floor.

“Agh!”

Blood pooled on the floor. Sailor let out a small groan of “Damn... run away... strange maid.”

“Mr. Sailor!? No! Hang in there!”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but... run away...”

“I won’t! I’ll get some help-”

“There won’t be any need for that.”

Harris coolly pointed the muzzle of his gun at Tessa as she clung to Sailor.

“This ship is going down. That’s what I would do if I were an executive in Amalgam. If this ship goes down in the sea in this weather, there won’t be any way to save it.”

“How could you? He saved you when you were our prisoner out of a sense of justice.”

Harris just shrugged at her glare of disapproval.

“Oh, well. He just wanted to play hero and cause problems. A loser. And let us not forget that the ones who got him as well as all of the other passengers and crew involved was none other than your Mithril.”

“...”

“But there’s no time. I’ve given up trying to get Kaname Chidori. I’ve decided to take you instead. If I bring them the Captain of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, then the organization will be understanding.”

He was planning on escaping, and taking her with him. He was going to throw away his passengers, crew and ship and run away.

“You coward. You’re unworthy of being a seaman...! Compared to Commander Sailor, you’re the loser!” Tessa criticized, but Harris just grinned and came up beside her.

“Wow, I was such an idiot. I didn’t notice at all when I was yelling at you on the observation deck when we first set out. Who’d have thought that the rumored Testarossa woman would be a little girl who was so pathetic and weak that keeping her down would be simple?”

His arm reached out for her neck.



Kaname ran up the stairs.

Holding onto the handrails, which were painted in rustproof white paint, she flew up three flights of stairs.

She wondered how much further it would be until they reached the top deck. In actuality, it really wasn’t that far up- but right now, for Kaname, this ship seemed like a 100 story skyscraper.

“Don’t stop, keep running!”

From behind her, Sousuke stopped, aimed at a pursuer, and shot. The sound of gunshots pierced the air, making it hard to catch what they were yelling.

“Haa, haa... for god’s sake...! Who came up with such a plan!?”

“You did,” said Kurz, finishing the joke as he shot his submachine gun.

Both Sousuke and Kurz, with a nicely timed tempo, alternated firing at the Alastors coming after Kaname.

“Uruz 7 to all units! We’re coming out at the jogging track! Don’t shoot at us! There are three enemies visible at present- no, now there are four! Team Echo will come from starboard-”

Sousuke speedily informed his allies over the radio. Now out of breath, Kaname made her way up the top flight of stairs, throwing the door wide open.

“...!”

We’ve finally made it to the top. The moment she thought this, she saw an Alastor standing right in front of her.

I-it anticipated us...!? Oh n-

A rain of bullets suddenly poured in as the Alastor made a grab for Kaname. She was attacked by the sparks as well as the ear-piercing sound of shells grating against bulletproof armor.

“This is Team Golf! We somehow managed to make it in time. Hurry and get Angel to safety- you hear that, Kaname!? Run, run, run!!” yelled a Mithril soldier holding a gun- she remembered that his name was Yang- from his position only five meters to her right. He was in the corner of a corridor that led to the fitness center.

“Uh...”

“Hurry!”

Sousuke grabbed Kaname and ran in the opposite direction. The Alastor tried to attack Yang and the others, but Kurz fired to distract it. Just when they thought they had managed to escape the

enemy's clutches, another Alastor appeared out of the darkness, rushing at Kaname and Sousuke.

One right after another they appeared, chasing after them. Just how many of those things are there? She didn't even have time to catch her breath.

Right now, they were on the upper part of the ship- a huge rooftop deck. There were dual tennis courts and basketball courts. Kaname again found herself amazed by the sheer size of the ship.

“Run! Hurry-! Eh?”

When they looked back, they saw not one, but three Alastors pursuing them, as well as Yang's group making a hasty retreat. Kurz was also being chased after, the enemy showering him with bullets. He dove behind a nearby bench, then ran into the darkness as if he were being followed by a point-blank range impact.

“Don't stop! Keep going!”

Kaname frantically pushed on. She tripped over her own legs and fell down, but Sousuke roughly grabbed her arm as he ran, half dragging her along. She cried out “That hurts” and “Lemme go”, but he didn't seem to hear any of it.

“Stand up, partner! The goal is close!” he encouraged.

Partner. Really, what a boorish, unrefined word to use for a member of the opposite sex in a relationship. While she thought that, Kaname also reluctantly admitted- well, it probably suits us better than “honey” or “darling”.

Thinking such a thing in these circumstances...!

“What kind of Christmas is this!?” Kaname yelled to the heavens, amidst the gunshots, explosions and screams.

Okay, at this age, it's okay to admit it. I love him. But why is it I'm only sure of it now? Of this trust. I can't deny it in the middle of this gunfire.

And tonight is Christmas.

Right about now, ordinary Japanese couples would probably be talking about their enchanting love with one another. There would be a beautiful night view and music full of emotion. A wonderful dinner and a loving conversation. It would be like a scene straight out of a Tatsuro Yamashita ballad. Even she longed for something like that just a little bit.

But I'm with this guy!

They were being chased by mysterious robots, flinching at the shells flying past them at point-blank range, and completely concentrating on just running. They were both dripping wet and running all over the place!

Who's ever heard of a couple like this!?



Really, why does it have to be Christmas!? "What about my youth- my 17th Christmas Eve!?"

“It was something in a former life! One of us must have done something terrible in a former life!!”

“I don’t really understand, but it’s not a problem!”

“It’s a big problem!! What’s happened to my youth- my seventeenth Christmas Eve!?”

“You think so? I think this night seems a lot like you, actually.”

“I can’t take this anymore-!!”

“Why are you laughing?”

“I’m crying!!”

Then the two of them stopped.

There was a wall ahead of them. The smokestack, called the funnel, rose into the sky right in front of them. Behind them were the open tennis courts. They looked back, gasping for breath, and found that approximately eleven Alastors had fanned out and surrounded them.

Clouseau chimed in on the radio.

“Uruz 1 to Uruz 7. Most of the other teams are out of ammunition, and won’t be able to cover you. I wish you luck.”

“Uruz 7, roger.”

Slowly, the eleven Alastors closed the gap. They were crouched down low, so as to be able to leap out at any time. They had their arm-machine guns out, aiming straight at Sousuke and Kaname.

“Seems they’ve cornered us.”

“Yes. Exactly as we planned, exactly as we planned.”

From up above, there was the faint sound of something scraping against metal, but Kaname didn’t really hear it. Clinging to Sousuke’s arm, she looked out at the group of Alastors.

“They’re gonna kill us.”

“You’re the one who guaranteed they wouldn’t.”

“Well, I’m not so sure now. Besides, you’re the one who’s in more danger, aren’t you!?”

Kaname said, clearly upset.

Without answering her, Sousuke quietly whispered over his radio, “It’s Uruz 7. You’re coming, right?”

There was no reply for a moment. Then the synthetic sound of a man’s deep voice answered, <Affirmative. I have arrived at my station. I was worried that I would not get my turn.>

“How many times have I told you to stop with the pretend-human talk?”

<How many times have I advised you that jokes are necessary in this type of dangerous situation?>

“...if we make it out of this alright, I’m going to dismantle you this time for sure.”

<Regrettably, Sergeant, you do not have the authority to do so.>

The Alastors stood ready. They were about to attack any minute. Sousuke clicked his tongue, then said to his partner on the other end of the line, “They’re coming. Permission to fire at targets. Shoot, shoot, shoot!!”

<Roger. Fire at will!>

Sousuke muttered, “What kind of will do you have, you idiot?” - but those words were erased by an unimaginably loud, thunderous storm.

Suddenly, from the top of the funnel, there came a firestorm of large 12.7mm bullets over Kaname and Sousuke’s heads. They were powerful shells that rendered the rifles and submachine guns used by Sousuke and the others useless. These warheads could easily shoot out a solid military engine. They weren’t for use against humans, but rather for destroying lightweight military vehicles.

Those bullets were shot out in a large quantity at a speed of 30 shells per second.

The barrage from the violent skies started again. From the right side of the robots to the left; then from left to right.

Small pieces of debris rained down all over Sousuke, who was lying on top of Kaname to shield her. The group of robots surrounding them were destroyed in a moment.

It seemed that several of the robots tried to self-destruct, but it wasn't enough to even hurt Sousuke and Kaname, who were lying in a drainage ditch in the corner of the court.

The Alastors were mostly smashed to bits now.

Somehow one of the Alastors had escaped the fatal blow, and was using its remaining limbs to make its way closer to its target, Kaname, and Sousuke, who was standing protectively in front of her, but-

Suddenly, the robot was flattened as if smashed by an enormous invisible hammer. The air above it shimmered like the haze on a summer day.

<All targets completely destroyed. Your orders?> said the voice over the radio.

“Cease fire. Stand alert on master mode 4.”

<Roger. Hold fire. Mode 4, stay alert, ready.>

“Disengage ECS.”

<Roger. ECS, off.>

Above the mercilessly smashed wreckage that no longer had even a visible shadow- in that space, a pale, light spot spread out. Instantly, that spot took form, and finally changed into the shape of a single AS.

It was the ARX-7 Arbalest.

It was bent down on its knee in the middle of the thick, black smoke, with the remains of the last Alastor still underneath it.

“...amazing,” Kaname said loudly without thinking, her face frowning because of the ringing in her ears from the gunfire.



When she had told them the strategy to lure and gather the robots to the only open place on the ship to deal with them, Sousuke and the others said, “We’ll use the AS on the helicopter overhead”. However, even though they were well aware of it, the AS’s overwhelming firepower had surprised even them.

Nevertheless, all it had taken for the Arbalest to wipe out the Alastors, which had given the flesh and blood humans so much trouble, was to use the two 12.7mm machine guns built into its head. These fixtures were low power weapons that weren't particularly useful in a fight with another AS.

One could only imagine the destructive capability of the high power equipment- the 40mm rifle or the 57mm shot cannon that the AS used. Just that alone was enough to make one's head spin. Their mobility and firepower. That the AS was called "the strongest ground weapon" was no exaggeration.

"Is it over?"

"Yes. What a wonderful view, too," Sousuke mumbled as he rose up in the midst of the black smoke, putting his hands on his hips. "Although the view would be better without the backside of that annoying AS."

"Ahh..."

Kaname just gave him a blank look, out of either relief or surprise, and the Arbalest responded over the radio, <Sergeant, when you say 'that annoying AS', do you mean me?>

"Guess."

<Completed. Would you like to know the results?>

"I'm not interested."

<Roger. I will input any valuable data regarding the autonomous combat function displayed by myself and these machines.>

"Good work. That is all."

<Training message. Please tell me the meaning of 'good work'.>

"Try guessing. After that, be quiet until you are given orders."

<Roger. But I do so reluctantly.>

“I said be quiet.”

<Roger.>

The Arbalest’s AI was silent.

Kaname, who had listened to the exchange quietly, thought *What a weird operator and AS...* For some reason, it sounded a little like an ordinary conversation between Sousuke and herself.

Ahh, I see.

Kaname realized deep down.

This Lambda Driver-equipped AS had been designed to be as close as possible to the passenger, so that it could understand and synchronize with the passenger’s mentality and emotions. It didn’t just copy them. It “matched up” with them. As long as that continued, this machine could efficiently amplify them from a chain reaction from the Omni Sphere. Compared to the enemy’s weapons, which could only perform the limited functions it began with, the ARX-7 held many possibilities.

The person who made this machine- Tessa had called him ‘Bani’- he was, of course, a very capable dreamer. She knew that he had liked Tessa, too.

“...Chidori?”

At Sousuke’s voice, Kaname came back to herself. Those thoughts had been a twinkle of light for just a moment.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“Ah... no, I’m fine. But what about everyone from our school? And Tessa..”

In the next instant, Kaname felt a new sensation flowing through her, and her body froze.

“Miss Kaname. I’m sorry to keep doing this. You did very well. I’m glad. But something terrible has happened. Please send a medic to the starboard corridor in H21 right away. There is a

casualty. He will need a lot of blood. At this rate, Mr. Sailor will die.”

Tessa...?

“I had also wanted you to send my subordinates to the observation deck on C16, but- they probably wouldn’t make it in time. Harris has me, and he’s almost finished making preparations to escape. This is probably good-bye.”

Tessa...!?

“I’m ashamed at my own helplessness. I wish I were as strong as you. Please be strong for everyone. You are probably the only one who can take my place. And concerning Mr. Sagara... ah... that’s all...”

“Tessa!?”

The resonance ended.

There was a pain in her right cheek, as well as the pain of handcuffs. And then the impression of that Captain’s slimy grin was all that was left.

Translator's Notes:

1. From what I read in Japanese, the lyrics sounded like a rough translation of “Eternal Father, Strong to Save”- although I can’t be sure, this is my best guess.
2. 165 cm = 5'4”; 50 kg = 110 lbs
3. The thermo cline is a transition layer between deep and surface water; 50 knots = 58 mp/h
4. ASW = Anti-Submarine Warfare

Chapter 5: Sleepless Holy Night

December 24th, 23:35 (Japan Standard Time)
Off the Coast of Izu Island, Underwater, Shark 1

Shark 1 inferred from the information it had received from the deployed sonobuoys that the *Tuatha de Danaan* was making a desperate feint. It changed course and speed frequently, probably to try to confuse the Shark's TMA (Target Motion Analysis).

It was a foolish decision. Did he really think that using textbook underwater battle tactics would work against these Leviathans?

Opening an encrypted line used in shallow underwater communication, Shark 1 sent orders to his subordinates.

“B240, D300, Code 13.

“Course 240. Go to a depth of 300, then attack the target from 3 sides. Permission to use high-speed torpedoes.”

Ten seconds later, he received a “Roger” from both of the other Sharks.

From the back seat, the “co-pilot” of Shark 1 activated the firearms control system.

The weapons loaded on the Leviathans were Soviet-made ultra high-speed torpedoes called “Buryas”, which could reach speeds of 120 knots. They could reach an enemy at more than double the speed of the torpedoes currently used by the Western powers. It would be impossible for even the *Tuatha de Danaan* to shake off these missiles.

The ship’s AI informed him that they were in optimal firing range. The other two ships had also snuck in to the same distance.

Even a quick submarine like the *de Danaan* would have no chance if it were hit by Buryas from three different directions.

He released the final safety device and pulled the trigger.

There was a heavy shock, and the super high-speed torpedo that the Leviathan had been carrying shot out of the firing tube, heading towards the *de Danaan*.

How easy. Extremely easy...

Shark 1 chuckled.

Then, aiming towards the waters where the Pacific Chrysalis was, he began preparing the equipment for the next task. Regular torpedoes would be enough for this.

He didn't know who was on that ship. He didn't really care. He would follow his orders and destroy it.



Tuatha de Danaan

The *de Danaan*'s deck officer, Lieutenant Godart, appeared very calm on the outside, but on the inside, his heart was beating violently against his chest.

Without any warning, they had suddenly found themselves in an almost hopeless battle. Just a few minutes ago, they had believed that there were no enemies in the sea which could threaten this ship at its best. But now...!

The enemies' speed was over 50 knots. And there were three of them.

More than likely, their top speed was better than the *de Danaan*'s. And this enemy- if this was normal- was blatantly disregarding the rules of combat. It was unthinkable to sneak in to try and strike the deathblow.

A hit and run, huh?

Draw in close with unbelievable speed, immediately striking with an insane amount of firepower. Then, once everything had been speedily taken care of, withdraw from the battlefield.

And all in a very short time. It would be impossible for an ordinary submarine, but these enemies could do it. If he himself hadn't been acquainted with the *de Danaan*'s abilities, Godart wouldn't have believed that such tactics were possible.

Compared to these small ships, which possessed the mobility of your average torpedo, the *de Danaan* was just too big. On paper, if this type of situation were presented, there would be no way to win. But no one would even hypothesize this kind of fight in the first place.

Godart glanced at acting-Captain Commander Mardukas' appearance. He was standing silently in the middle of the command center with a melancholic look on his face. He was probably guessing at how powerful the enemy was from the data they had collected so far.

His dark expression made Godart feel increasingly uneasy.

What's going on...

The enemy's movements were linear, meaning they were confident in their victory. Why the arrogance? Were they carrying some other kind of unbelievable weapon?

The sonar room answered that question.

"Con, sonar! Torpedo! Heading 0-4-9! From Mike 13!"

"Can you tell what type? And how fast?" Mardukas asked, unsurprised by the enemy's attack.

"Wait a moment... impossible. It's going too fast. More than likely, over 100 knots...!?" This kind of torpedo doesn't exist. What in the hell-"

“It’s a ‘Burya’.”

“Burya?”

Godart raised his eyebrow when he heard the Commander’s words.

“It’s a Soviet-made super high-speed torpedo. It creates an air bubble around itself and uses a rocket motor for propulsion. It probably uses a wired guidance system. It seems that occasionally the Intelligence Department can do their job.”

“Bu... but Captain, even if we know what it is, we won’t be able to shake it off at that speed.”

“It’s strange that a ship could shake off a torpedo to start with. It’s nothing to make a fuss about.”

“But...!”

Mardukas darted an angry look at Godart.

“Don’t panic, Lieutenant. If you panic, you’ll bother me. If I’m bothered, then this ship will sink. I’m sorry, but this time there won’t be time to argue about the details of battle tactics while I’m giving you gentlemen instructions. Obey without thinking. Quickly, and loyally.”

“Y... yes, Sir.”

“Very well. Then set course 1-3-5. Slowly speed up to 60 knots. Don’t worry about cavitation. Open door to torpedo tube number three. Cancel all safety devices.”

“A... aye, Sir!” he replied, and repeated all of the orders.

<Estimated 60 seconds to contact>

Handling the complex target motion analysis, the mother AI began the final countdown. Then the sonar room yelled out as if they had been hit.

“There’s two more torpedoes! One each from Mikes 14 and 15! The same kind as the other! Their directions are 0-6-8 and 0-8-9!”

The enemy torpedoes that were currently heading towards the *de Danaan* were astronomically more powerful than the ones used by the American submarine during the Perio Islands incident. He wasn't even sure they could dodge just one- but now there were three of them coming from three directions.

There was no time. Only about 50 seconds.

Even so, from what Godart could tell, Mardukas didn't seem to be upset. He just stood there staring sullenly at the multi-purpose screen like a student of codes in front of a seemingly meaningless sequence of information.

None of that data showed a way for the ship to escape.

Unless- Godart thought- the Commander sees something the rest of us don't...?

"We've passed 50 knots."

"What's the course of the torpedo from M13?"

"2-2-1."

Right now, the *de Danaan* was moving on a course almost perpendicular to the course of the torpedo. The torpedo was correcting its route little by little as it made its way straight towards them.

"Now... 40 seconds left!"

Then, in a tone of voice that made him sound more like he was ordering lunch in a restaurant than fighting a battle, Mardukas replied, "That will do. Full stop. All ahead port. Course, 0-4-5."

"Aye, Sir! Full stop! All ahead port! Course, 0-4-5! ...what!?"

Even though he diligently carried out the orders, the executive officer's expression radically changed. This was because Mardukas' orders were moving them into a course that faced the incoming torpedo head on.

“Weapon’s control. When we’ve reached course 0-4-5, fire torpedo number three.”

“B-but at that distance, the safety devices will-”

“Five degrees more.”

“Aye, Sir! ...Firing number three!”

The torpedo rushed out of the firing tube. Immediately, Mardukas ordered, “Start engines, all back full. Activate EMFC.”

“Full reverse!”

“EMFC, contact!”

The speed of the enormous ship suddenly decreased. It pulled away from the fired torpedo at full speed, stopped before long, then began to retreat. But the enemy torpedo had closed in on them. Was he trying to ambush it?

Godart went pale. It would be impossible to attack a torpedo coming that fast with their torpedo. Because of the enormous amount of water pressure, as well as the torpedo’s explosive power, the blast radius would be very small. Unlike its fellow anti-aircraft missiles, whose blast could scatter debris for dozens of yards, if the torpedo didn’t hit its target almost exactly, then it would cause no damage.

It wasn’t as if the Commander didn’t know that. Then why was he-

“All hands, brace for impact,” Mardukas said in an even tone of voice over the ship intercom, then gripped the armrest of the Captain’s chair right beside him. Godart hastily followed his lead.

On the main screen, the marks of the approaching enemy torpedo as well as the torpedo they had just shot were at a distance where they would make contact in a few seconds.

“FCO. You’re calm, right?”

“Y... yes, Sir!” the fire control officer replied in a high-pitched voice.

“Very well. Detonate torpedo three. Right now.”

“Aye, Sir!”

The torpedo exploded just short of the enemy torpedo, right in front of the ship. A tremendous roar and shock wave hit the *de Danaan*. The ship shook as if had taken several hundred jabs, and the crew was tossed around.

“...uh!!”

Godart nervously poured over the wavering main screen while gripping his seat.

Intercept failed. Their torpedo had exploded before the enemy torpedo had passed.

Because of the tempestuous noise caused by countless numbers of bubbles, he couldn’t confirm its existence, but it was probably still alive. And it now it would be aiming for them at high speed.

According to the countdown, there was one second left-

“Next. All back stop. Move forward at two-thirds power. Course, 0-6-7. Surface to periscope depth,” Mardukas said through the noise. His tone of voice stated that he had already moved onto the next level of the fight.

“Eh...?”

Beginning with Godart, most of the crew looked doubtfully at each other.

The enemy torpedo had disappeared. All of the data confirmed it. Even though their torpedo hadn’t hit it.

“We’re past the first one. Number two and number three are on their way. We’re going to fight the others the same way. With the next interceptions, shoot all of the maglocks from the

MVLS above the surface. Set all of the coordinates exactly as I give them. Understood?"



Shark 1

The pilot of Shark 1 was surprised. The Burya heading towards the "Toy Box" had been destroyed by the blast of the enemy's torpedo.

"Impossible... they knew?"

One of the Burya's few weaknesses.

In order to displace the enormous amount of water pressure created by the amazing speed at which it traveled through the water, the Burya formed a large bubble-membrane around itself. That balance was very delicate- if it were hit by a momentary explosive impulse from a certain distance, the sudden turbulence which beat against it would render it flightless.

Just like a plane going into a tailspin.

Once the balance has been destroyed, the Burya is unable to protect itself from the power of the water and its own speed tears itself in two.

The commanding officer on the *Tuatha de Danaan* noticed this weakness.

Shark 1 hadn't been surprised for long before the enemy ship had moved onto its next course of action. And the *de Danaan* was using the same method as before to attack the approaching Buryas from Sharks 2 and 3.

There were numerous explosions in the distance, causing a deep-sea concerto of ear piercing noise. The racket caused by the

birth of millions of bubbles completely masked the sound of the *de Danaan*'s movements.

This is bad.

He couldn't see the enemy. First, he would have to decelerate to eliminate the noise, then listen carefully. Shark 1 suspended its high speed cruising. The loud turbulence disappeared, and in the deep, dark silence, Shark 1 concentrated on the data from the sonobuoy.

He didn't know where it was, but the *de Danaan* was probably still out there. There was no doubt that they were lying still in the area around where the explosions occurred. However, if he took offensive measures, he would soon find out their position.

"Be careful. If we find them first, victory will be ours..."

The area of ocean which had been filled with noise until a moment ago, suddenly became a quiet, pitch black void.

His two allies had also dropped speed, cruising along silently.

"The bubbles around the enemy ship have cleared away. Let's set sonobuoy to active to confirm their position," his co-pilot said from the back seat.

"Good. There's nothing our colleagues can do. We'll calmly track down our enemy."

It seemed that the Buryas had been overkill, but he wouldn't use the same trick twice. This time, if the enemy took the offensive, he would sense their position first, then deliver a blow that would be impossible to avoid. He would challenge them to close combat.

In any case, that ship would meet its watery grave.

"They won't know what hit 'em... heh heh heh."

Just after Shark 1 had gloated, he detected a new sound source. It sounded like each of his allies- Sharks 2 and 3- had been surrounded by five large splashing sounds.

That was because something had dropped from the sky.

It was-

“Maglocks!? When did they...!?”

Maglocks were anti-submarine missiles. Like Tomahawk missiles and Harpoon missiles, they were shot from underwater; after speeding along above the surface of the water, they reentered the water, used their sonar to lock on to the enemy submarine, and destroyed it.

The *de Danaan* had shot out a large quantity of Maglocks without him noticing.

Normally, he would have been able to detect the sound- a very large reverberation- of an enemy firing a group of missiles above the water. He could have used that time to take evasive maneuvers beforehand. Then it would have been a stalemate.

However, Shark 1 had been completely unable to hear the sound of the *de Danaan* firing those missiles, because it had been masked by the sounds of the Buryas exploding. They had used the very short amount of time during which the shock waves had hit them, causing an enormous amount of noise-

“It can’t be...”

When he realized the level-headedness and audacity of the enemy commander, the pilot of Shark 1 shuddered.

For his comrades, who had been taken by surprise, there was no chance. The torpedoes had been spread like a net in a small, several hundred-meter radius. That alignment was also so accurate it was god-like.

Before they had time to exhibit their ostentatious high-speed capabilities, Sharks 2 and 3 were caught by the Maglocks that the *de Danaan* had shot and sunk.

The ringing sounds of merciless explosions and noise confirmed it quite clearly.

“A... all back flank. Course 2-7-5. Those Maglocks’ll get us if this continues!” his backseat co-pilot reported. Then, shaking off the unpleasant memories, Shark 1 thought again.

But it’s okay. We’ve already fired an ADCAP at that passenger boat. It’s not like a Burya; it’s only a conventional torpedo, but it’ll be enough for that ship.

It was less than five minutes to impact. It was proper that the most important mission be carried out. After this, the Pacific Chrysalis would go down along with its hundreds of passengers. And so would the *de Danaan*. He would have his revenge.

“We’ll approach from the north and use the remaining torpedoes to hunt them down. If they dodge those, then we’ll use our speed to come in close and bring them down with the grappling arms.”

“Understood. We’ll show ‘em.”

“The enemy got the upper hand, but that ends now. We’ll show those bastards!”

It had received some unexpected damage, but the remaining Shark could still bring the *de Danaan* down. They would see.



Tuatha de Danaan

“M13 reacquired! Direction 0-3-1! It’s started accelerating to course 2-0-5!” the sonar room reported without trying to hide the excitement in his voice at all.

“Th-the last enemy is approaching from the north, Captain. It won’t run across anymore of the Maglocks,” said Lieutenant Godart, who, up until a few seconds ago, believed he was going to die. He wiped the beads of sweat from his brow.

The way the Commander had dealt with those enemy missiles, the brave counterattacks he had used just on the verge of impact- even though he had seen all of that with his own eyes, Godart thought that this time they were helpless.

“Course 2-0-5, you said?” Mardukas replied as calmly as ever.

“Affirmative!”

“Speed?”

“Estimated 50 knots!”

“Hmm...”

When Mardukas heard that, his expression loosened just a little. It was the smile like that of a teacher when a certain student has given him exactly the answer he expected.

“I see. M13. If you still wish to fight my ship, then there’s no other road to take- although it’s a pity...”

“Captain? What...”

“Lieutenant. You recall the ADSLMMs we set up earlier just in case, right?”

“Ah...!”

The ADSLMMs- when Godart remembered the position where they had secretly deployed the self-propelled mines, he slapped his forehead.

Right now, the last enemy was headed straight for the area where those mines were hidden.



Shark 1

Shark 1, who was burning with the desire for revenge, was completely unaware of the enemy mines hidden in his path.

If he had been thinking discretely and prudently, he would have thought about the possibility of the enemy shooting them while it was making so much noise. If he knew just that, he would have still been able to escape.

But he didn't. While he understood that the abuse one suffered in private was a certain thing in the navy, he had never understood the cold, reckless behavior of his former superior officer.

Suddenly, two self-propelled mines appeared in his path, heading straight for him.

“Wha...”

Even with the Leviathan's mobility, it was too close to avoid.

There were only a few seconds left. He shot some decoy countermeasures, but they were completely ineffective at such a close distance. His co-pilot in the back seat let out a scream.

Between that and the noisy ringing of warning alarms inside the cockpit, he cursed the name of his former superior officer.

“Mardukas. You son-of-a-bitch.”

Those were his last words. The *de Danaan*'s smart mines detonated nearby, blowing Shark 1 to pieces.



Tuatha de Danaan

“The sounds of the ADSLMM exploding. M13... has sunk!”

When they heard the sonar room’s report, the crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. But there wasn’t enough time for everyone to burst out in joy like in a movie scene.

Godart was also incredulous. He smiled tensely as he glanced at Mardukas’ profile.

“C-Captain...”

“The enemy should have known better. Trying to sink a ship under my command with three tiny ‘underwater fighters’ is like trying to challenge a fortress with three infantrymen.”

From the very beginning, Mardukas was able to anticipate everything, from how the fight would progress, to how the enemy would move. Just like a chess match. What composure- what courage he had. Knowing the true merits of his superior officer put Godart at a loss for words.

“If the Captain had been here, she would have done the same thing. If it had been her orders from the very start, you probably wouldn’t have been so terrified, huh, Godart?” Mardukas said in his normal, stingingly sarcastic tone of voice.

“No, I just... I apologize.”

“Hmph. Never mind it, then. Besides...”

The Duke returned his hat back to its original position.

The Commander, who had shown that he wouldn’t be beaten by the likes of Lieutenant Commander Kalinin or any of the other burly ground unit men, turned back into the tired, middle-aged man that he always was.

“This is game, set, match. Open a line with the ground unit right away. They’re in more danger than us right now- there’s a torpedo headed their way.”



Pacific Chrysalis

When it rains, it pours.

Just when they had taken care of the group of Alastors which had appeared on the ship, Sousuke and the rest of his unit received word from the *de Danaan* about a new threat.

“Enemy high-speed torpedo approaching. Estimated time, under one minute. Take evasive maneuvers and evacuate the passengers without delay.”

“Damn it, could you not be so nonchalant about it?! Well?!” Kurz yelled at the heavens when he heard the communication. His voice was drowned out by the sound of the evacuation broadcast over the intercom.

“All passengers and crew are to immediately evacuate to the starboard, or right, side of the ship. I repeat, the starboard side of the ship. We are incredibly sorry to make you, our good passengers, worry on such a wonderful, wonderful Christmas Eve, but in order to prepare for the very small chance that something might happen, we need you to immediately make your way to the starboard side of the ship-”

Clouseau grabbed onto the side railing and yelled into his radio, “Enough with the stupid apologizing already and just repeat the order!” to his subordinate on the bridge.

“But, Lieutenant Clouseau, since we’re inconveniencing everyone, it’s our duty to- oops, damn. The speaker switch is on.”

“You idiot...!!”

Clouseau, whose real name had just been grandly announced all throughout the ship, shook his fist as the vein in his head throbbed.

“Uh, Lieutenant. I understand that you’re in a difficult position and all, but I think we’d better evacuate. If the torpedo hits, this part of the ship will probably be blown to bits,” Kurz said calmly from behind him. Clouseau just clicked his tongue.

On Mardukas’ orders, all of the helicopters on the *de Danaan* were waiting on standby for a rescue operation. The other transport helicopters that had taken off beforehand were to scatter countermeasures above the water to jam the torpedo’s guidance systems, and try to somehow protect the ship.

However, it would be almost impossible for such a large ship to avoid an enemy missile.

“Everyone is to evacuate. There’s nothing that can be done now.”

“There is a way,” Sousuke replied over the Arbalest’s external speakers, as well as the radio. When they looked back, they saw the Arbalest, which had just been boarded by its operator, stand up in the middle of the tennis courts.

“Hey, what’re you doing, Sousuke?” Kurz asked- right next to him, the Arbalest walked over to the port side of the ship in which the torpedo was headed, and gazed out into the pitch black sea.

Inside the cockpit, Sousuke pushed the voice command switch and said, “Al. Activate all sensors, no limits. Wide reconnaissance. Search for a heat source up to a depth of 30 feet.”

<Roger. A torpedo?>

The machine’s AI, Al, answered.

“Yes.”

<Target detected at Alpha 12. Direction, 11 o'clock, distance, 1000. Estimated 90 kilometers per hour. It is approaching. 30 seconds to contact>

“Sniper mode. We'll intercept it using all firearms. Adjust for calculation errors.”

<This machine does not possess valid alignment correction data in regards to an underwater target>

“It can't be helped. Now concentrate.”

<Roger. Sniper mode>

Sousuke could see the glowing white “heat source” approaching from underneath the surface of a green-colored sea on the night vision screen.

This wasn't a time to be conservative with the ammunition. He lined up his sights, and without any hesitation, pulled the trigger.

The 40mm rifle he was holding as well as the head-mounted 12.7mm chain gun lit up. At the Arbalest's feet, Kurz and the others covered their ears against the terrible noise and ran towards the starboard side of the ship.

The “chain gun” was a 30mm machine gun originally developed for use by combat helicopters. It was reduced in size, its firing speed increased, and then mounted on the heads of the Arbalest and M9s. This was the chain gun that only moments ago had put an end to the row of Alastors. Its firing speed was 1800 rounds per minute. That calculated to it being able to spit out 30 large-sized bullets per second. That chain gun, along with the 40mm rifle shooting 1200 rounds a minute, rained down a barrage of bullets into the sea.

But for all of the firepower that he used, the approaching torpedo didn't change course at all- because nothing hit it. The courses of the bullets became erratic the moment they hit the

water's surface. At best, their power only lasted to a depth of a few meters.

The high-speed torpedo continued on its course straight towards the *Pacific Chrysalis*.

<Interception of torpedo failed. Evacuate immediately.>

Al was probably thinking about their safety. It was recommending retreat.

However, at that moment, as Sousuke stared at the floating image of the target on the screen, his normally under-used imagination started working.

There was nothing left to do. The ship would sink. His colleagues, everyone from school, and Chidori would all be blown up and thrown into the winter sea.

He wouldn't let that happen-

That certain confidence and determination awakened the sleeping system within his machine with perfect form.

<It is here. We can do it. Your orders, Sarge>

Al replied briefly, as if inspired by Sousuke's feelings.
“We're going in!”

<Roger>

Sousuke and Al threw themselves off of the deck of the *Pacific Chrysalis*, out into the sea in front of them.

It was a short flight. The bubbles from where the machine dropped into the water violently burst open against their surroundings and disappeared. Using a wire gun which it had shot into the ship's hull, the Arbalest skillfully adjusted its own position as it swam through the turbulence caused by the large ship's hull.

<The torpedo is coming. OK. Stay in this position. Ready?
Count 5. 3... 2...>

AI counted down with perfect timing, expertly picking up on Sousuke's tempo and mood. It was a message that would have been impossible for an ordinary AI.

Up ahead, in the middle of the night vision screen, the torpedo approached at high speed.

<Now!>

Grasping the controller, Sousuke jerked the right master arm. The Arbalest traced the movement exactly, delivering a firm punch into the torpedo that now filled his vision.

The waters foamed, and space became distorted.

The Arbalest's Lambda Driver started, and drove an invisible force field into the torpedo directly in front of it. Suddenly, the target was smashed to bits and blew up.

All of the energy from the blast was blown in the opposite direction.

An enormous waterspout erupted from the water, and the aftershocks of the explosion rocked the ship. The Arbalest was also at the mercy of that same tremendous power as it clung to the wire coming from its left arm.

“...uh!”

<Success. Lambda Drive was functioning. The enemy torpedo has been destroyed. We should quickly raise our spirits in case there is another one. Confidence. Confidence is very important.>

“I got it, so shut up!” Sousuke yelled as he struggled to keep the unit's posture control against the raging waters. It would be a serious problem if the wire gun's anchor were to break and pitch him out away from the cruising boat.

It wasn't long before the turbulence from the explosion died down. There didn't seem to be another torpedo.

Sighing with relief, Sousuke carefully retracted the wire gun and somehow managed to climb back onto the ship's deck.

The crises and dilemmas continued.



At the same time that the Arbalest had stopped the torpedo, Kaname, along with Yang and several Mithril soldiers, was running to the starboard side observation deck. After she had heard Tessa's voice, Kaname called out to the nearby soldiers and they took off towards the section where the lifeboats were kept.

Suddenly, they were hit by a thunderous noise and shockwave. The boat leaned precariously to the right, and Kaname, who was clinging to the wall to keep from being tossed around, yelled out, "What was that just now!?"

"It felt like we were just hit by the torpedo, but... that's odd. It didn't seem to do much of anything."

Sousuke and the Arbalest somehow found a way to stop it...
Kaname thought, then stood up.

"Then it's probably okay. Let's hurry!"

"Eh? Uh, sure," Yang answered, and took off once again.
"But, are you certain!? That the Captain's been taken-"

"There's no doubt. That other Captain used a life boat and over there!"

Kaname pointed to the area in front of the jogging track where several lifeboats hung.

Yang moved out in front, his gun straight in front of him.

"Stay down, and get behind me. The enemy could be hiding."

According to the guidance map right beside them, there were five lifeboats stationed in this area. But when Kaname and the others ran in, the number of boats there was- four.

“One’s missing. That means Tessa’s...!” Kaname cursed. Then one of the soldiers yelled, “Damn it. On the water, in the direction of one o’clock, distance 500!”

When they looked out in the middle of the dim ocean illuminated by the lights of the luxury ship, they saw a single boat moving away at full speed.

“We’re too late,” Yang said despairingly.

“We can’t give up now, can we!? There’s gotta be a way-”

“I got it- this is Uruz 9 to Gebo 9, do you read me?” he called out over the radio to the helicopter flying overhead. That transport helicopter- Gebo 9- soon replied, “This is Gebo 9, we read you.”

“You know the lifeboat that just left the ship? Leaving north-northwest, distance is 800 meters. Ansuz has been abducted! Stop it!”

Even as he said this, the boat on which Tessa was riding got further away by the moment, and was eventually swallowed up by the night.



MH-67 “Pave Mare” Multi-purpose Helicopter
Call Sign “Gebo 9”

“Stop them? How!?” Lieutenant Eva Santos, pilot of the Mithril multi-purpose helicopter- MH-67 Pave Mare, replied in a raised voice as they circled four kilometers south of the Pacific Chrysalis.

“Tessa’s on it, right? So we can’t attack it without involving her, too.”

“Well, can’t you just hit the engine or something!?” Yang yelled over the radio.

“That’s easy for you to say. We could try it, but... ahh, damn it. Where’s the target!?”

Santos yelled, and the electronic warfare officer operating the helicopter’s infrared sensors from the backseat quickly replied, “Wait... I found it just now. Course 3-4-0, distance 4000. Moving at 30 knots.”

“Alright then, we’ll circle around from the left side and move in.”

Lieutenant Santos moved the controller, making the helicopter hurry after the boat. The engine turbines groaned, and the Pave Mare closed in on its target at once. Because it had already dropped off its large cargo, the Arbalest, the helicopter was able to move almost as sharply as a small fighter plane.

In less than a minute, the boat skimming along the surface of the water was within the view of their night vision goggles.

“I see it. Have mini-gun two on standby. Even if you miss, don’t hit the Captain.”

“Roger, Captain!” the firing crew replied spiritedly. Santos ordered them to take up position about 200 meters off the left side of the boat kicking up the white caps of the waves.

“Fire!”

The muzzle of the 7.62 Vulcan machine gun mounted on the right side of the Pave Mare lit up. A rain of 100 bullets a second grazed the back of the boat and caused numerous waterspouts to shoot up out of the water. Unfortunately, their aim was off.

“Adjust your aim!”

“The waves are making it bounce all over the place- shit, we’ll hit the Captain. The target’s too fast. There’s no way to just hit the engine. Can’t we get any closer!?”

“Understood, I’ll try-”

When Santos went to move the helicopter closer, something unusual happened. Several hundred meters ahead of the life boat- from an area of water where nothing was, came a ribbon of light.

“Anti-aircraft missile!” someone yelled.

The missile, which had suddenly appeared from the water, rushed through the sky, heading straight for Santos’s helicopter.

“Kuh...!”

She violently moved the stick and cyclic. Scattering decoy flares and chaffs throughout the sky, the Pave Mare went into a steep turn. It was a rough maneuver that looked like they were diving straight into the water.

It was close. Then two seconds later...

The missile exploded at point-blank range.

There was an impact and the sound of something going “gakun” on the right side of the helicopter. The meters spun out of control, and a dark, metallic noise thrummed from the engine and drive shaft.

A lot of alarms went off. The co-pilot and electronic warfare officer were yelling.

“Engine two is on fire! Electricity failing! Oil pressure falling!”

“We’ve lost the starboard ECS unit! The left stub wing’s been blown off!”

Santos, who was dizzy from hitting her head on the corner of the seat, calmly checked the response of the controls.

“Don’t panic. Cut the power to engine two. Switch the electric and hydraulic systems to backup. And the fuel supply system, too. The tail rotor’s still working, right? Can we still see!?”

“Affirmative!” the crew in the cargo hold answered.

“And the automatic fire-extinguishers?”

“Operational.”

It was okay, they could still fly. If they had responded just a few moments later, they would have been blown up. It had been close.

While directing minor damage control, she used the active ECCS (anti-ECS sensors) to scan the area of ocean that the missile had come from.

“Damn...” she cursed when she confirmed the target’s true nature. Floating on top of the water, hidden by ECS, was an enormous airship. An infantry-portable anti-aircraft missile had been shot from its wing. The airship probably belonged to Amalgam. It had used ECS to slip into these waters without anyone noticing.

They couldn’t outrun a second shot. She really wanted to save Tessa, but they would end up being shot down before then and everything would be lost.

“...retreat.”

Gritting her teeth, she turned the helicopter back in the other direction. Santos had no choice but to give the humiliating report to her unit.



In the cabin of the boat, which now sped through the night, Tessa sat quietly, with her hands cuffed. She could do nothing but watch silently as her allies’ helicopter faded into the distance after

being attacked by a missile. That was probably Lieutenant Santos's Gebo 9. She hoped no one was hurt.

"Hm hm hm hm, hmm hmm, hmm hm hm huh, hmm huh hmm..." Harris hummed as he sat in the pilot's seat, the salt air blowing over him. It was Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

"It's Christmas. Be happy," he said cheerfully as he turned around to face her. "To tell the truth, you're a much harder VIP to obtain than Kaname Chidori, since you're usually hidden under the water where no one can reach you. But I got you. I really- really got you. If I could have used the facilities on my ship, then I would have been able to thoroughly investigate your mind, but... well, just have to give up on that, I guess."

Tessa said nothing, scowling at her companion.

"Ooh, how scary."

Harris shrugged.

"But it is a shame. I'll probably be removed from the role of investigating you personally. I wanted to strip your spirit bare, and penetrate you to the deepest recesses of your mind. I wanted to see that strong, beautiful face of yours distorted as you cried out in pain. Expose all of your ugly hatred, fear, and obscene desires- your eyes clouded in a trance, spit dripping wretchedly down your face... I really wanted to see it."

Tessa, taking in the vulgar look he gave her, opened her mouth.

"...the equipment you used to study Miss Kaname in Shun On is on that ship, isn't it?"

"That's right. That's because it's a boat that goes all around the world. It's very convenient for abducting 'candidates' that have been chosen from all nations using certain techniques, and getting them out of the country."

"How inefficient. If it were me, I'd-

“You wouldn’t use such methods. Don’t you agree? That’s the point. That’s why we haven’t been suspected until now. No matter how popular they become, a passenger boat like that usually carries the harmless upper class. Local customs, public safety, secret services; all of them give us leeway. Because they think, ‘there’s no way’. I know now- the reason you guys suspected the ship’s true purpose. Probably thanks to Mr. Iron’s meddling.”

“...”

The boat’s engine became quiet.

“We’re here. A pleasant flight awaits us.”

From the cabin window, Tessa could see the wing of the gigantic airship with the ECS now cancelled. The boat she was riding slowly turned and pulled up along the right side of the ship.

“Stand up,” Harris commanded, pulling Tessa up.

The airplane she transferred to was about the size of an average jumbo jet, big enough to carry several 50-ton tanks. It was even larger than the C-17 “Globe Master II” transport planes that Mithril used.

Soviet-made, huh...

She had seen the recent reports from the Intelligence Department. This was the world’s largest aircraft that could perform water take-offs and landings. And from looking at the equipment in its hold, she could tell that it had transported some small ships.

“Don’t be looking around! Walk!”

An armed member of the airship’s crew prodded Tessa in the back.

As soon as they had finished the transfer, the ship started to accelerate. The waves crashed up against the hull, causing it to shake a little.

No one was there to stop it.

The large airship left the water, rising up into the night sky.



Pacific Chrysalis

“They got away,” Clouseau said dismally after cutting off his radio.

“The Captain is... the enemy has...”

“Hey, hey, aren’t we going to do something!? It’s still close, right? If we shot an antiaircraft missile or something-” Kurz raised his voice, but Clouseau cut him off.

“Shoot it? With her on there?”

“Uh...” Kurz faltered.

The enemy airship was already in the air. It would be easy for the *de Danaan* to shoot it down with an antiaircraft missile, but then Tessa would die, too.

Not noticing that airship land near the *Pacific Chrysalis* in the first place was a defeat. But there was no helping it. The *de Danaan* had been fighting the enemy submarines, and Santos’s helicopter had been preoccupied with that as well as transporting the Arbalest. It would have been impossible for even the most capable soldier to notice an airplane using ECS at a time like that.

Sousuke had taken care of the robots and torpedoes. Mao said they’d have the vault open in a little bit. Mardukas had said that there weren’t any other threats underwater. It seemed that Santos’s helicopter was down, too. Most of the hostages were unharmed. The worst injury had been to the American who had been with Tessa- and according to the medic who had treated him, he had narrowly escaped death.

Everyone had done their best. They would soon be able to safely withdraw.

But even so, Tessa was-

“Shit!” cursed one of the soldiers, “How could this happen? And today was her birthday, too...”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it,” Sousuke said over the external speakers. The Arbalest was kneeling down next to Clouseau and the others as they stood helplessly in the middle of the tennis courts, which were strewn with the debris of the Alastors.

“Her birthday, huh? Today’s been a really busy day. -really busy.”

“Sousuke...?” Kaname, who was as downtrodden as the others, looked up.

“What’re you talking about? Tessa’s been kidnapped! How can you be so indifferent all the time-”

“No. I understand the severity of the situation. If you ask around, it seems that Christmas is a day when anything can happen.”

“...huh?”

When she raised her eyebrow in doubt, the Arbalest’s AI answered instead of Sousuke.

<That is correct, fellow-comrades in arms. Today is Christmas. According to the information from the radio reports I have picked up over the past few days, it is indeed a day when anything can happen. The feeling of being able to overcome anything is essential. So let’s sing sweet carols, and praise God in the highest.>

“-how many times do I have to tell you to shut up, you idiot!?”

<Excuse me. Anyway, please explain our proposal to them, Sergeant,> Al said disinterestedly, and Sousuke clicked his tongue.

He then cleared his throat, then told everyone, “Lieutenant Clouseau... first, please contact the *de Danaan*, and have them surface and send out the AV-8s. We need to gain some time. Then have them prepare the equipment I list off. The skill of the maintenance crew will be vital. First, we’ll need-”

After listening to Sousuke list off various parts and equipment, Clouseau’s eyes, as well as everyone else’s, grew wide.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. I’ve had Al do the calculations, and he says it’s possible. Although there is the problem of the preparation speed.”

“It’ll be dangerous.”

“That can’t be helped.”

Clouseau grabbed his chin as he thought it over- then he lifted his face and looked up at the Arbalest.

“Very well. We’ll give it a shot.”

He turned on his radio. Opening a line with the nearby *de Danaan*, he relayed the details. Next to him, Kaname, who had listened to their conversation in silence, looked anxiously up at Sousuke.

“Ar... are you sure this will work?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you said...!”

“There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Uh...”

“It’s something that I just noticed earlier. Don’t worry. It’s probably a good thing. But I don’t want to say it with things being the way they are right now with her.”

The Arbalest’s two eyes looked down at her. Its right hand moved and gave her a thumbs up.

“When I come back, I want you to listen to me.”



December 25th, 00:13 (Japan Standard Time)
Over the Pacific

She could see the moon floating in the night sky from her window-side seat. It seemed that the airship was turning in a southwest direction. But Tessa, who was a prisoner, was unable to guess anymore than that.

What was their exact course? What was their altitude? And where were they going? She didn't know.

Her own ship, as well as that passenger ship, was probably safe. And that stubborn but good-natured Sailor character, did he get the medical attention he needed? And how was the vault that Mao and the others were having difficulty with-

She couldn't help but think about those sorts of things rather than her own fate.

After takeoff, Tessa had tried to use her "resonance" with Kaname again, but it was no use. For some reason, resonance with another wouldn't work if you were too far away. For example, if they were "thought waves" that were transmitted through the air, then the cause would have something to do with their strength and wavelength.

"So Miss, is there anything I can get you to drink?" Harris said as he returned to the cabin after talking with the pilot. "I'm sorry, but we're out of champagne... but it seems we have ginger ale. How about we toast to our new endeavor?"

"How about you drink alone?"

"That's cold. It's thanks to me that you didn't share the same fate as that ship. I would like it if you showed a little gratitude."

Just then, the airship shuddered. The high-pitched sound of turbines reverberated through the walls, and the cabin ceiling shook a little.

“What is it?” Harris yelled, clinging to his seat.

“Mithril STOVLs!” the pilot said over the intercom. When Harris looked out of the window, he saw one of the *de Danaan*’s fighter planes, a Super Harrier, flying surprisingly close by.

Harris went pale.

“Impossible. I’ve got the girl with me. If they shoot us down, then—”

Outside of the window, the red light of a flare bomb flitted by. It was a warning shot. It was so close that it could graze the wing.

Beside him, Tessa gave the crouching Harris a cold smile.

“It’s the logical course of action. I know a lot of Mithril’s classified information. It would be wise to blow me, along with this ship, up before you could drug me into talking, now wouldn’t it?”



December 25th, 00:20 (Japan Standard Time)
The Tuatha de Danaan’s Flight Deck

Inside the Arbalest’s cockpit, Sousuke checked the condition of his oxygen mask.

The ship’s air-traffic controller informed him of the situation.

The large airship carrying Tessa was flying on course 196 at 350 knots. They were losing altitude and speed due to the threatening conduct of the ally AV-8.

“It’s still in range. But this is crazy, Sergeant Sagara. Theoretically it’s possible, but-”

“It’s not a problem. Anyway, I’m depending on your support.”

“Understood. Leave the guidance to me.”

“Thank you,” he answered briefly, then scanned the screen display. Launch mode. All parts of the rotor blades and rocket motor, check. Fuel, good; oil pressure, good; data link with ship, connected.

<Final check complete. Awaiting orders from the control room>

Right now, the Arbalest was fixed to the *de Danaan*’s flight-deck steam catapult. On its back was the “XL-2” emergency expansion booster, like those used by Mao and the other’s M9s during the rescue mission in Shun On.

The original purpose of the emergency expansion booster was to forcibly make them fly by using enormous wings and rockets and throwing them into a distant battlefield in a short amount of time. Because they detached before landing, they could only be used one-way. The return trip was either walking or transport helicopter.

The roar of the booster grew louder.

A pale flame blew from the nozzle. The extremely hot exhaust escaped upwards from the blast deflector- a plank sticking out from the back.

“Flight control. All preparations are complete.”

“Roger. Beginning final sequence. Uruz 7, you are clear for take-off. Good luck.”

“Uruz 7, roger.”

<Sergeant. We have received the final clearance for take-off. Beginning countdown. Count 5->

Al's voice reverberated throughout the cockpit, which was creaking because of the booster's power.

<4. 3. 2->

The nozzle contracted, the flame flashed brightly, and the entire AS leaned forward.

<GO>

The rocket disconnected. The catapult, which had the power to easily sling a one-ton vehicle one kilometer, accelerated the Arbalest at once.

The G-force was terrible. And the sound was loud enough to burst his eardrums. He felt like his body was sinking into the back of his chair. The end of the flight deck drew closer. The Arbalest automatically detached itself from the launch block, and jumped using the power in both of its legs.

The takeoff was a success. The numbers on the digital altimeter climbed instantly. The figure of the *de Danaan* reflected in the external sensor became distant in no time at all.

Altitude 5000 feet and rising.

If it had been a normal launch sequence, this is where the AS would stop its ascent, and then soar straight to its target destination.

But the Arbalest didn't stop its ascent. It continued to rise further.

Altitude 7000. 8000.

The vibrating of the fuselage didn't change. Because the wings were, by design, used for regulating courses at low altitudes, the uncertain situation didn't end. Even though the altimeter indicated they were still rising, Sousuke felt like he was falling. If they didn't operate while the rocket's power was at its maximum, the Arbalest would at once fall into a spin and crash.

Alarms went off. Al warned him.

<Booster is abnormally overheating. Cause is due to the length of time at maximum output capacity>

“Pray. This is a gamble.”

<I interpret that order to be a joke. However, a joke at a time like this is mostly ineffective. Your rules of usage are->

“Nonsense?”

<Affirmative>

“I’ve begun to understand that recently, but-” Sousuke cursed as the violent vibrations almost caused him to bite his tongue. “Jokes are something that should be told at ineffective times.”

<A profound thesis>

“Think about it later. Concentrate on the controls.”

<Roger>

It was cold. In order to perform this operation, the cockpit couldn’t be pressurized. Because he had done drops from high altitudes numerous times, he knew how his body handled being under low pressure, but-

18000. 19000.

20000 feet.

<We have reached restricted altitude. Following control room’s guidance and changing course.>

The Arbalest stopped ascending, then flew straight into the prescribed direction. It was only a few seconds before Al reported:

<Target acquired!>

In the image captured by the night vision sensors, Sousuke could see the exhaust heat of three aircrafts. The two ally Super Harriers, with the remaining one belonging to the enemy airship. It was the size of an average jumbo jet. It would probably be able to carry more than six M9-class ASes with room to spare.

Tessa was in there.

This was where he would attempt an extremely dangerous maneuver. However, Sousuke possessed a strange kind of confidence.

No problem.

He would clean this up neatly, and finally go home.

<There is little fuel remaining.>

“I know. Lower velocity as we approach. 150 feet above and right behind it.”

<Roger>

They drew in closer to the airship. The turbulence created by the target shook the Arbalest violently. This was as close as they could get on the temporary wings of the emergency expansion booster.

However, this was not a fighter plane. This was a human-shaped weapon; an Arm Slave.

Its uses depended on ideas. It didn't need to be held back by common sense.

“Let's go...!”

<Roger>

When it reached just 50 meters above and behind the airship, the Arbalest thrust out both of its arms.



“What're you doing? Shake them off. Since we're in cruising range-”

Just as Harris ran into the cockpit, something strange happened.

There was the sound of something metallic hitting the ship from behind. The ship suddenly dipped, causing Harris to almost fall over.

There were decompression warnings. The sounds of alarms rang all throughout the cockpit. A bunch of lights flashed red, and the pilot and co-pilot started yelling.

“What’s happened?!”

“It seems like we’ve been hit by something. The pressure inside the plane is dropping quickly. If we don’t decrease altitude, we’ll be in danger.”

“Don’t be stupid! Never mind that and just shake it off!”

Harris caught him up by the shoulder, but the pilot pushed his hand aside.

“Like I can do that! Why don’t you have them stop their attacks?”

“Don’t worry about it and just keep flying. It’s not like any of her people have the guts to drop this ship.”

That’s right. This was all a bluff. If they were trying to shoot them down, they would have sent out a missile much earlier. Their aim was no doubt to make them land on the water. In other words, they were limited to just meddling with their flying.

The enemy STOVLs had a short cruising range. If they went just a little further, they would have to give up their pursuit.

“Mr. Harris, bring that girl in here. Let them hear her scream in pain over the radio. Then we’ll warn them to stop their attack.”

“But that girl is- no, you’re right, that’ll work. We’ll remove a finger or something.”

After accepting the pilot’s proposal, Harris started to return to the cabin where Tessa was, when-

This time, they were hit by an enormous impact.

The ship dropped several dozen feet as if something was pressing down on them from above. Harris went airborne, and

bounced up and hit the cockpit ceiling- then dropped and hit the floor.

Gasping through the burning pain in his shoulders and back, he got up.

“...what the hell was that!?”

But it looked as if neither of the pilots could hear Harris’s question. Their eyes were fixed on the multifunction display in one corner of the cockpit.

The ghastly pale Captain groaned, “How in the hell... damn it... that’s fucking insane.”

There was an image taken by the camera set up on the tail. From the top of the tail, it commanded a view of a large portion of the ship’s body and wings.

They saw someone on the middle of the body, hanging on to the roof right behind the wings.

No, this wasn’t human. This was a much larger, human-shaped machine.

It was an AS. A white AS.

“What!?”

The enemy white AS was clinging to the back of the ship. It drove in its wire gun, closed in, then plunged its monomolecular cutter into the roof.

“Shake it off!”

“Don’t be stupid! Our wings would break before then... huh!?”

Bewildered and not knowing their enemy’s intentions, they watched as the AS did something even more unbelievable.

The cockpit hatch opened.

The operator emerged, wearing a helmet and oxygen mask.

That operator dropped from the back of the white AS down onto the roof of the ship. They could see a wire attached to his hip

to keep him from being blown off by the raging wind. It was probably tied to somewhere in the cockpit.

Even though he was hidden in the shadow of the AS, he bent down into a posture for rappelling off the ship. But the man, as if he were repelling down the surface of a building, skillfully used the wire to back up ten meters, then threw something.

“What is that? What’s he trying to do?”

“That’s a... shaped charge.”

Harris’s expression changed, and he ran to the rear cabin.

That man was planning on coming in alone by blasting a hole in the roof...!



He was being tossed around by the fierce wind.

Sousuke moved several meters away from the shaped charge and pressed the detonation switch.

There was a dry implosive sound. Debris went flying, and was blown away in the blink of an eye. An enormous amount of mist was pulled from the one-meter open hole towards the tail.

Fixing his grip on the wire, he kicked the roof with a light ‘don’. Trusting his body to the force that would pull him down, Sousuke hopped in. He defied hitting the fragile inner wall, and jumped down into the cabin below.

He released the wire, and grabbed the submachine gun strapped over his shoulder. The sudden decompression of the inside of the plane had caused a white fog, which was being sucked up through the hole that Sousuke had come in through.

“Kill him! He’s alone!” someone yelled from beyond the bits of dancing paper and cloth. There were two men with guns.

Sousuke closely adjusted his sight on those who were angrily pointing their guns at him.

They immediately started firing. And then more gunfire.

Moments later, both of his enemies doubled over and collapsed. Despite the shaking and gusts of wind, Sousuke ran towards the front of the ship. He ran through several doors and passageways before he encountered more enemies.

The enemy soldiers shot freely. The sound of the numerous gunshots burst in his ears. Sousuke crouched down to dodge the attack, and as he jumped for cover, returned fire.

Shells, sparks and people's cries were flying all over the place.

One by one, the enemies fell. Compared to fighting the Alastors on the ship, these guys were easy opponents. These enemies were excited, impatient and enraged.

No- actually, that was the problem.

Their erratic gunfire was shooting holes all in the ship. Several important cables, oil pressure pipes, even the distributing panel were blown out. It seemed that the enemy had forgotten they were still flying.

This is bad...

The ship shook furiously, lights were flickering on and off, and fires sprang up here and there. The engine was also making a strange "dooon" sound.

They were losing altitude.

After he had taken out the last enemy in the cabin, Sousuke immediately looked around. He couldn't see Tessa. The control room was in front of this. Had they taken her to the cargo hold below? Or-

Sousuke was shot right in the back.

"...!"

He knew that his bulletproof vest had stopped the bullet. Staggering, he turned around and quickly pointed his gun behind him.

“Oooh?! Just try and shoot!”

Harris was standing in the cabin entrance, holding a large pistol. He was cleverly using Tessa, who had her hands tied behind her back, as a shield.

“Mr. Sagara!?”

She looked more astonished than relieved. It seemed that even Tessa didn’t anticipate using such a method to infiltrate a flying aircraft.

“Captain. I’ve come to bring you back,” Sousuke said, pointing his gun straight ahead.

Turbulence made the fires inside wreathe around. There was furious noise and vibration. There were even flames blazing outside the window, because the failing engine had caught fire.

“Give up and hand her over. This ship is going down. There’s still time to escape.”

“No,” Harris sneered as beads of sweat formed on his pale face. “I’m ruined no matter what happens. At least this way, everyone goes with me.”

“Can you not see what a disadvantage you’re at?”

“I’m perfectly calm!” the hysterical man shouted. “That organization would never forgive me for escaping alone. It’s the same if I’m captured by you bastards. You’d pump me for information, then throw me away. I’m dead either way.”

“...”

“But I’m not going to let you do what you want. I can still kill you. All I have to do is wait.”

A stream of sweat rolled down Sousuke’s temple.

He was serious. He was planning to die.

It would be extremely difficult to accurately hit Harris in the middle of a shaking plane with violent gusts of wind blowing through while he was using Tessa as a shield.

“I hadn’t expected this at all, though. A sailor like myself, dying in the sky.”

There was a dark humor mixed in that voice filled with despair and resentment.

“You bastards at Mithril successfully started the counterattack. But that ends here, too. Amalgam is a very elusive, very powerful organization. You won’t be able to crush them with military power. And they are trying to put an end to the typical expansion of that military power.”

“What...?”

“You’re a pro, Sousuke Sagara. So far, you guys have proven to be an opponent that’s more than a group of punks with new toys. Amalgam has also been collecting mercenaries. If Mr. Iron- Gauron- hadn’t been taken over with a cancer, he probably would have become Commander. The next-in-line, Mr. Kalium, was a man who paled in comparison ability-wise, but- luckily or unluckily, he was killed by your hand. In Hong Kong.”

Gauron, taken over by a cancer? Even though he was taken by surprise at these facts, Sousuke was aware that their time was running out. From the receiver in his ear, he could hear the voice of the air-traffic controller on the *de Danaan* yelling.

“-there’s no time. This is it. Get out of there.”

“They’re cruel and cunning. They’ll eradicate your friends. So why don’t we just go ahead before them and check out the next world together?”

“You’re joking.”

“You’re gonna shoot me, huh?! You’ll hit her!” Harris sneered as Sousuke concentrated on his alignment. “You’re afraid

you will, so you can't. That's the way with you bastards. You're on the side of justice. How sickening. But reality is harsh, and the world is cruel. At any rate, your friends on that ship will learn that. Fate will betray them, and in that defeat, that harshness will become theirs. And the only ones that can do it is my organization!! Only Amalgam can put an end to it all!" Harris yelled, having moved beyond the point of madness.

The body of the airship began to make a bizarre creaking sound. Harris's right hand moved. He pointed the pistol at the back of Tessa's neck.

"No—"

The next few seconds lasted an eternity. But even so, it was still hard to aim. The vibrating plane shook the muzzle of his gun.

But Sousuke fired.

Very calmly.

The bullet hit the wall, scattering sparks and going clean through the other side. Harris, who had been shot beyond the wall and in the chest, staggered and fired his pistol. Tessa fell down in front of him. From his position, Sousuke couldn't tell whether or not she had been shot.

"Tessa!?"

"I... I'm alright—" Tessa replied in an unexpectedly cheerful voice. It looked like she hadn't been shot. Harris was lying face down and didn't move.

They were out of time. Sousuke ran up to her, took her by the arm and hurried to the nearby hatch. He turned the emergency lever and opened it. Tessa's hair and skirt flapped around in the wind.

"Mr. Sagara, where's your parachute—"

"I don't have one. Sorry."

Breaking into the ship and fighting alone in a shootout would have been impossible wearing a heavy parachute. Depending on the situation, he had planned on maybe stealing an enemy parachute and escaping, or maybe taking his original route back to the Arbalest.

But now there wasn't enough time left for any of that.

This ship was going to disintegrate before it ever hit the water's surface.

"Then there's nothing left to save us..."

"There's one last chance. Now, hold on to me tight-"

Just then, the airship's wings broke in half.

The ship rolled haphazardly as it went to pieces. Sousuke and Tessa were thrown into the empty pitch-dark of space. She tried to hold on tightly to his arms, but unable to resist the violent wind and centrifugal force, she let go.

"Tessa!!"

Sousuke's voice was erased by the wind and explosion. Her small body was tossed around by the turbulence, and she quickly dropped further and further away.

A crushed body. Broken wings. And in the middle of the debris, Tessa fell.

Even though she could see pieces and parts burning here and there, it was extremely cold. She could see the horizon dimly lit by the moon's light floating in the night sky. How much time did she have left before she hit the water's surface?

Tessa felt faint as she gave herself over to gravity. A shadow drew closer to her. He skillfully manipulated the wind using his arms and legs, and managed to glide straight through the sky.

He was using free fall technique.

Sousuke Sagara's body collided with Tessa's a little roughly. Embracing each other, the two of them spun around several times in the air. Even though they would fall and die like this, he stubbornly wasn't giving up.

Pressing his mouth up close to her ear, Sousuke yelled out something. His lips touched her earlobe. The sensation was quite sweet.

But his words weren't quite as sweet.

"Hold onto me! Don't let go!!"

"Eh...?"

"Brace for impact!"

Just then, the figure of an approaching white AS filled her vision on the right.

Having detached its wings and now free falling, the Arbalest came closer and closer. Just as she clung to Sousuke's chest, the two of them hit its enormous hands.

The AS had chased them down and rescued them in a sideways position.

"Uh...!!"

The breath was knocked from her lungs. She felt dizzy, and couldn't tell which way was up or down.

Then Sousuke yelled out, "Open parachute!"

There was a final impact. While it held Tessa and Sousuke, the parachute sack on the Arbalest's back burst open. The parachute, a tool used many times by humans, spread out towards the heavens. It was a miracle that she didn't bite her tongue.

Suddenly, the squalling wind ceased, and her surroundings became quiet.

The wreckage of the burning airship outstripped them and crashed into the water several hundred meters below them. The Arbalest on which they were riding descended slowly.



A mid-air rendezvous- his lips gently touch Tessa's earlobe as they fall...

空中のランティバー。
墜ちていくテッサの耳たぶに
彼の唇がそつと触れる……。

<This was a very Ultra-C night>^{*1}

The AS said over the external speakers.

<I only briefly calculated it, but the odds of successfully completing this kind of nonsense mission is 256 to one. Although the phenomenon of Christmas being able to disregard probability theory is->

“Shut up.”

<Roger>

And the AI went quiet.

The parachute flapped in the wind, making an irregular fluttering sound.

“Captain. Are you hurt?” Sousuke asked the vacant-looking Tessa.

“...huh? Oh... uh, I might have some bruises, but... I’ll probably be okay.”

“Good. If even the smallest thing had happened to you, the people in our unit would have killed me.”

“I wonder about that,” Tessa said in relief, but a little bit sulkily. “They may just look worried on the surface. But do you think that they really care what happens to a useless idiot like me?”

“Captain...”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. It’s not like I really meant that. But-” Tessa swallowed her words.

She felt miserable.

Why was Sousuke the one who had come to rescue her like that? If it had been anyone else- Clouseau, Mao, or someone else, she wouldn’t have felt like this.

Is it really a good thing that he did something so dangerous for my sake?

Does that mean I mean something to you for you to have come this far?

*That's not it, is it? Because you can't make her sad.
Was it comradery? A sense of duty? The confidence that
you would return alive?*

It was probably all of them. But that made her despair. The motive for his being there was not the kind that she really wished for. It certainly wasn't his sincere love.

When Harris had taken her hostage, Sousuke had shot him without hesitation in the end. If it had been Kaname, he probably wouldn't have shot. Even though it meant she would have died. There was a difference here. A definite difference.

"There's nothing I can do" -she remembered Captain Sailor's words.

It was exactly as he said. In the end, her illicit love hadn't been enough.

Of course, she wasn't the one who had intimately captured his heart and wouldn't let go. It was *her*. It was the world she belonged to. She knew that. Even from Tessa's viewpoint, the world he had encountered was so dazzling and charming...

Was this really love?

Would someone prove to her that this wasn't just an ordinary escape? Would someone prove to her that the man before her eyes really loved her?

Staying silent became painful, so she asked.

"Mr. Sagara?"

"Yes?"

"Do you like Kaname?"

"...probably, yes."

"More than me?"

Sousuke's cheeks tensed up. But at the end of his hesitation, he answered clearly.

"Yes."

She had known it, but she felt like she had been hit in the back of the head. But that was only natural. Sousuke Sagara was not the type of man who would be wishy-washy and at loss for words when something was presented clearly to him. That was his appeal. That- was the harsh reality.

Tessa hid her eyes, and mumbled, “You say that very bluntly, don’t you...”

“I’m sorry.”

She had had a dumb, secret fantasy up until a few days ago. Everyone on base would throw a party, and after the banquet had gotten underway, by chance, the two of them would end up alone. He would say, “Happy birthday, Tessa,” and-

She tried not to cry, but couldn’t help it. Big teardrops rolled down. She wanted to run away from him, but she couldn’t do that either in the hands of a descending AS.

“I’m sorry. I... I’m fine. I guess I’m just... just a little disappointed.”

She tried to force out a smile. Sousuke’s happy appearance gripped her heart.

“Ah, because a mission that was supposed to be pretty light ended up so messed up, you see. Because I’m always so useless. This has been a pretty terrible birthday.”

Sousuke didn’t say anything. He desperately refrained from giving excuses, or saying words of encouragement.

Because he was sincere.

He was- really sincere.

But I love him. I want to be with him. Couldn’t God grant that one thing, that meager wish on Christmas?

Fate.

Harris’s last words resurfaced in her mind. Didn’t it all start when you couldn’t forgive fate for letting the gears of something

that was yours go out of control? For the first time, she felt like she understood the feelings of those people who had conveniently labeled themselves “terrorists” and were destroyed.

The Arbalest neared the water’s surface. In the distance, she could see the faint light of the friendly helicopter coming to rescue them.



Pacific Chrysalis

“Uruz 1 to Uruz 2. How are you progressing? Are you done yet?”

He’s only asked “Are you done yet?” no telling how many times tonight, thought Mao.

This was also desperate. If they were sloppy with the vault’s lock, the explosive apparatus would operate and be irreparable. They had to be discrete and quick. Her colleagues didn’t understand just how difficult that was.

“For heaven’s sake. I completely understand how a writer feels on his way to the publisher’s...” she muttered as she wiped the sweat off her brow and hurriedly tapped on the keyboard.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Executing protocol simulation QRD. Just a little longer.”

“How many times have you said, ‘just a little longer’ tonight? It seems the Japanese Coast Guard has noticed the disturbances. We’re out of time, so don’t give me ‘just a little longer’, I need an accurate—”

“When I say ‘just a little longer’, it means just a little longer! If I’m right, 10 seconds! If I’m not, then more than a 100

minutes! Before you start barking at me, buy me some time, okay? Time! God, since the moment you were promoted to management, you've become really boring, you know that!?"

"Anyone appointed to such a haphazard unit would be nervous, too! I can't help but feel sorry for Commander Mardukas and Lieutenant Commander Kalinin. I swear, you're so-"

"Wait!" Mao said, focusing on the display screen. It was the "Yes/No/Cancel" screen that asked whether or not to oscillate the final unlock signal. After a moment's hesitation, she chose "Yes" and pressed enter.

A muffled sound resonated from the inner part of the metal door. The vault door that had been fastened hard opened smoothly as if it had never been locked at all.

"What is it?"

"It opened."

After a short silence, Clouseau said, "Okay. I'll get you 15 minutes somehow. Anyway, investigate and report."

Just then, Mao remembered the person who normally should have been there.

"And Tessa? Is she alright?"

"Sagara did well. Anyway, hurry."

"Roger. Out... okay, it's open! We're going to do some housecleaning! Keep it up!" Mao told the nearby PRT soldiers, and rushed into the vault. Disregarding the line of racks holding works of art and jewels, she ran towards the middle of the room. There was a door standing wide open in what normally should have been an ordinary wall. Mao had already cancelled this lock with the operation outside.

She stepped into the vault room door.

The room was the size of a school classroom.

There was numerous electronic and medical equipment. There was a grandiose coffin-size medical examination table surrounded by a lot of sensors. Mao was knowledgeable about electronics, but she didn't understand what purpose this equipment served.

How should she investigate this?

If Tessa were here, she would have promptly started handing down the necessary orders.

“Second Lieutenant, where do we start?” one of the soldiers asked. Mao, who was at a loss for an answer, just shook her head and said, “It doesn’t matter! Just take what you can, and carry all that you can carry. It’s okay to be rough. Use the adze to break into the cases and pull out the hard disks!”

Even so, there was no doubt that they had scored big. If they could take their time to study it later, then they could find out a little about what the enemy was doing- and why they were targeting people like Kaname.

From the beginning-

Mao thought.

Tessa’s birthday was today, December 24th.

Kaname’s birthday was also December 24th.

Their race, history, personality, body characteristics- the only common feature of those two very different people was their birthday. Was it simply coincidence that these two, who possessed some kind of power that exceeded human intellect, were born on the same day?



December 25th, 01:30 (Local Time)
Sydney, Australia

The bar was crawling with people celebrating on Christmas. Run DMC's "Christmas in Hollis" was playing, and drunk men and women were singing, drinking, and making a racket.

In the dark recesses of the bar, a young man was sitting in a seat dimly illuminated by a pale light. He had long, ash-blonde hair, bluish-gray eyes, and graceful features.

He was listening to the details of a military operation in Japanese coastal waters from the receiver in his ear, as well as concentrating on his glass after dealing with a tottering woman's seductions, when a large man wearing a suit sat down on the other side of the table facing him.

He had a quiet look, and wore his long gray hair pulled up in the back. He had heard that this man was in his mid-40s, but he was starting to look old, probably due to having led a tough life.

"I've kept you waiting, I guess" the man said.

"Not really. How did it go?"

"We've captured Admiral Borda's secretary, Mr. Jackson-whom your people call 'Mr. Zinc'. Since we didn't tell anyone about my unit's movements, he was found out easily."

"How splendidly skillful of you."

"I wonder. If you had wanted to, you could have let him escape."

"But if I did that, then we might have had to kill each other," the young man said half-jokingly, then drained the contents of his glass in one gulp.

"Anyway, it's been an honor to meet you, Lieutenant Commander Andrei Kalinin."

"I have heard rumors about you, Mr. Leonard Testarossa."

A waiter carried over a vodka.
The two politely lifted their glasses.



Translator's Notes

1. “Ultra C” in Japanese refers to a decisive technique for beating one’s opponent.

Epilogue

The withdrawal operation went smoothly.

Mao's team carried out any equipment hidden in the vault room they could get their hands on, then loaded up on a helicopter and withdrew. Clouseau's team, after apologizing politely to the passengers and crew, hurriedly left the boat behind. They had proposed to take the security personnel influenced by Harris into custody, but they took the bold step by not doing so. The security personnel knew little concerning the Amalgam organization.

The *Pacific Chrysalis* was taken into the protective custody of the Coast Guard before daybreak on December 25th, and entered Yokohama Port early that morning. The Jindai High School students were impudent, facing the cameras of the journalists and reporters and giving them the peace sign, disgusting those in the school who had good sense.

The only critically wounded person, Commander Killy B. Sailor, survived due to the “terrorists’ swift medical care”, and was a favorite child of the media. Those involved were bewildered by his claim of, “It wasn’t the terrorists. I was shot by the Captain!”, but wrote it off as an “accidental shooting”.

Commander Sailor, though, without being convinced, tried to tell the reporters about the mysterious maid he met as well as the other events, but the Navy’s upper stratum ordered him to stop.

Don’t think about it. Just tell them “I did my best”. Just accept this and be a hero. Sailor wanted to challenge it. However, when they dangled a “promotion” from his more-important-than-life assignment as the Captain of a ship to a desk job in the Pentagon, he had to keep his mouth shut.

The incident remained strongly in his heart.

The matter with Captain Harris was a disgrace. After being shocked by the “accidental shooting”, he left alone on a boat. He then got lost, and his whereabouts remain unknown. After Sousuke and Tessa were picked up by the friendly helicopter, they were carried to the *Tuatha de Danaan*. He didn’t get the chance to return to the passenger ship and talk to Kaname.

Two days later, the unit held its delayed Christmas party, while at the same time celebrating Tessa’s birthday. She wasn’t expecting it at all, a so-called “surprise party”.

Mardukas, who was sullenly wearing a pixie-hat and pince-nez glasses, gave her a bouquet of flowers; Kalinin, who arrived late from Sydney, gave her a red brooch saying, “This is from an acquaintance of mine”. Mao handed her some Dior lipstick, saying, “You’ll become a great woman. Cheer up.”

Tessa was extremely overjoyed by what her subordinates had done for her, but- of course, she was a little sad.

It was three days after Christmas before Sousuke had settled the details, drawn up his report, attended the party, and finally returned to Tokyo.

There was a special attendance day on the morning of the 28th. Naturally, the classroom conversation was about the sea jacking incident.

Because there were some students in the class who had not gone on the trip, those who had weren’t lacking for things to tell them.

The newspapers were only moderately interested in it, probably because no one had died. It seemed that on the same day, some American cabinet ministers were killed by a terrorist bomb- and that story was far more interesting. This made the Jindai students extremely unhappy.

Their homeroom teacher, Eri Kagurazaka, told everyone in her class, “Okay, well! I don’t know what kind of star we’re under that we’ve yet again been involved in such a dangerous situation, but the important thing is that everyone’s okay! But, if by some million-to-one chance there’s a third incident, please make sure to stop giving peace signs to the press! Everyone understand!?”

“Yeees,” the students answered obediently.

“Okay, then. Well, have a good year!”

Homeroom had lasted barely ten minutes. Students complaining, “Don’t call us out if this is all you want” busily started on their way home.

Kaname had some miscellaneous matters to attend to and temporarily left the classroom.

She returned ten minutes later after she had taken care of business. Her classmates were already gone.

All except one: Sousuke.

He was leaning against the wall near the window. It looked like he had been waiting for her to come back.

“Have you finished?” he asked in a somewhat rigid voice.

“Yeah. And you?”

“I’m free for now. But... do you remember what I said to you on the ship?”

“Uh... y-yeah.”

This was the first time the two of them had been alone since they parted on the *Pacific Chrysalis*. All he had said was “I have something to tell you when this is over”.

Kaname felt uncomfortable.

“Y... you said, you wanted to tell me something?”

“Yeah. I...” Sousuke stammered. “How can I say this? What I wanted to tell you is... well...”

Hanging his head, he nervously looked here and there. He wiped his brow and sighed deeply. His cheeks looked red.

“I give up. More than one day passes, and I lose my nerve...” he muttered to himself.

“What are you talking about...?”

“No, sorry... anyway, since there were all sorts of problems earlier, I missed the right time, but... this is for you,” he said, forcibly changing the subject. He reached into his collar pocket and pulled out a raw gem.

It was a rounded, smooth elliptical shape, and colored the deep blue of the ocean.

It had the deep impression that it had enclosed the tide’s currents, or a dark whirlpool.

“What’s this?”

“Lapis Lazuli,” Sousuke replied. “It’s something I picked up during my time in Afghanistan. If it’s alright with you, I’d like you to have it.”

She stuttered, “Th-thank you. But... you recently gave me a Christmas present-”

“No. This is a birthday present.”

“Uh-”

“I had planned to do this. From the beginning, I’ve... how should I say this... felt that it would suit you.”

That was probably the utmost of his courage. He hesitantly took her hand, and laid the jewel on her palm.

“I know it’s late, but happy birthday.”

The coldness of the stone, along with the warmth of his hand, became a contrast beyond compare.

“And... Merry Christmas.”

“Um hmm.”

She couldn't help but feel strange, looking at his overexerted appearance.

"Thank you. It's a little late, but a very Merry Christmas to you, too!"

The End

Afterword

Forgive me. It's taken two years, but I present to you the new Full Metal Panic long novel, "A Dancing Very Merry Christmas".

Before, I said, "Next time, it will be a lighthearted story", but... it didn't end up being a happy Christmas for all of the main characters. So again, I apologize. Well... it's not as if there are people who don't want to see the protagonist in a normal love comedy like Sousuke going back and forth, confused between multiple heroines. Yes, I have times when I feel that way, too.

Around the time I was writing this story, I tried to collect information about the so-called luxury liner. I took the cheapest two-day, one-night cruise because I was paying my own way, but wearing a suit, that night I was awed by the extravagant cuisine and concerts. I had wanted to do stuff like drink in the lounge, but I ignored that and took pictures of everything with my digital camera to give to Mr. Shiki to use as material.

I wanted to see the engine room, crew quarters, etc; more than the showy stuff, so I asked the front people (although, to be accurate, they are called something else), "Can I look around?" But I was very politely rejected with a smile and told, "On the one week cruises, we give tours of those facilities, so please apply there". Or, in short, "Come back again".

But it was costing me almost 40,000 yen^{*1} for just one night, so there was no way I could do seven nights. Since I had no other choice, I had to take desperate measures. Late that night, and without permission, I tried infiltrating the crew quarters. It was a one-man sneaking mission. I was wearing my suit with my small camera in hand. I felt almost like James Bond.

So, while I was tiptoeing around taking pictures, I spotted the engine room. I then heard the footsteps of a crewman approaching from around the corner. I was really in a hurry then.

This is bad, they'll find me. What'll I do?

Should I run away? No, I should surprise attack him, break his neck, and steal his uniform and ID card... those kinds of thoughts ran through my mind for just a moment.

Well, in the end I was found, reprimanded and made to go back.

Unfortunately, I wasn't caught and strapped to some weird torture device, or thrown into a pool filled with man-eating sharks.

All of that aside...

The series will soon be rushing into the second half. Right now, there are probably three or four long novels left until it's finished- that's what I'm estimating, but we'll see how it goes. I've been thinking things like I want to raise it up to a full-blown pace soon, how should I raise it (but I'm always thinking things like that...)

I think this is the last time an incident will be wrapped up in one book. As far as the short stories go, not writing about the juicy material after January- Valentine's, skiing, hanami*² and such was not totally unrelated to the plans for the long story.

...and if I give various tales of the mind, I'll strangle myself much like this time. I wonder if that's alright. Yes.

Now, some other stuff related to Full Metal Panic.

Because of your support and encouragement, the Full Metal Panic anime was a huge success (Mr. Chigira and everyone involved, thank you). Because of all of this, the decision has been made to produce the next anime series. This time it will be based

on the short stories, and will have a good comedic tempo. The director will be the up-and-coming Yasuhira Takemoto, a nice guy who knows about art. While it is audacious of me, I will also be working on the script. Yay.

In comics, the fifth volume of Tomohiro Nagai's "Ikinari! Full Metal Panic!"^{*3} will be coming out at the same time as this book. You'll laugh yourself to death reading this series.

Unexpectedly, it seems that there are readers of the original works who haven't read it, so I'm taking this chance and strongly urging you to do so.

I wonder if the tankoubons^{*4} of the comic version of "Full Metal Panic!" by Retsu Tateo will be a little longer? I of course am looking forward to them. It is popular enough to be released in South Korea and Taiwan.

The "Full Metal Panic! Card Mission" trading card game by ORG is popular enough to keep the booster packs coming out. While people certainly like it for the game, there are also illustrations by Douji Shiki that no one's seen. Well, onto the next thing.

...there's a lot of advertisements?

Yes, well. As I've said before, I can never think of what to write in the afterword. Nooo, oh, well.

Now then, there were a lot of people who gave their support this time, too. They have my undying gratitude for very patiently putting up with the likes of an idiot like me. Really, thank you very much.

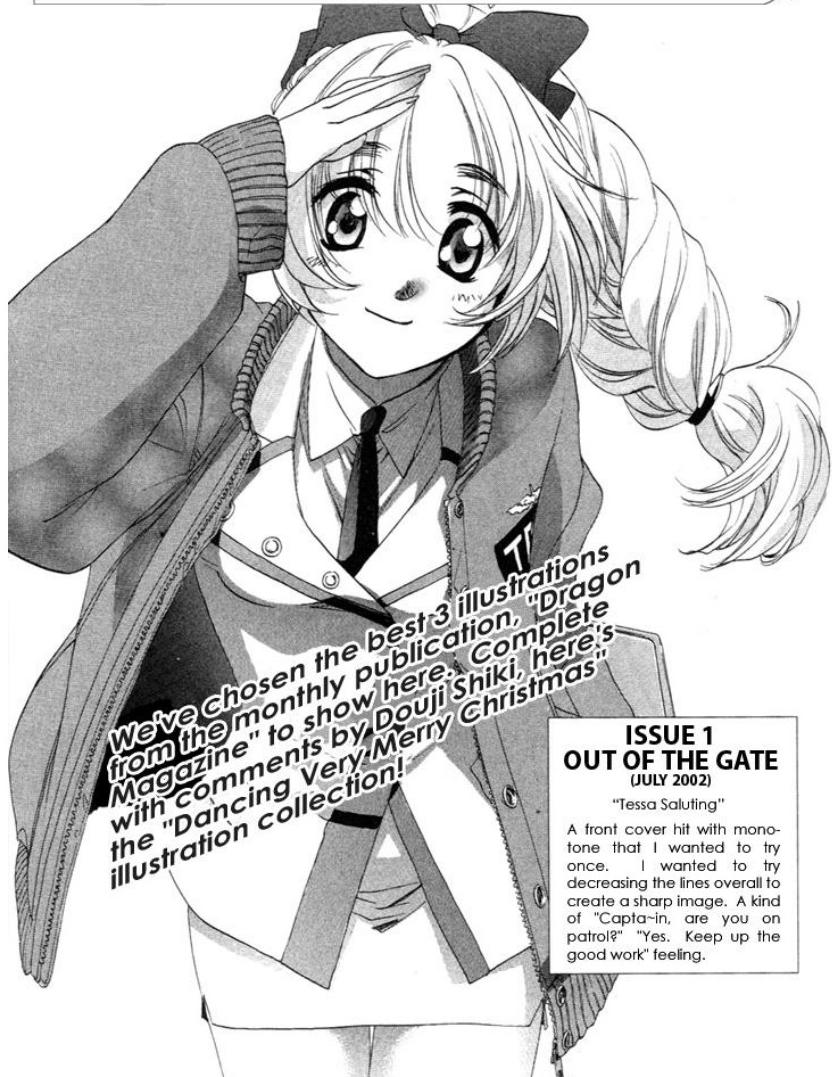
Till next time, then, when we follow Sousuke into hell once again.

Shouji Gatou
February, 2003

Translator's Notes:

1. About \$400 US
2. Hanami is when the Japanese go out during the cherry blossom season to view the flowers.
3. "Full Metal Panic: OVERLOAD!"
4. Tankoubons are the volumes with the chapters collected together.

"A DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS" SPECIAL PROJECT
DOUJI SHIKI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION



We've chosen the best 3 illustrations from the monthly publication, "Dragon Magazine" to show here. Complete with comments by Douji Shiki, here's the "Dancing Very Merry Christmas" illustration collection!

ISSUE 1
OUT OF THE GATE
(JULY 2002)

"Tessa Saluting"

A front cover hit with mono-tone that I wanted to try once. I wanted to try decreasing the lines overall to create a sharp image. A kind of "Capta-in, are you on patrol?" "Yes. Keep up the good work" feeling.

"A DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS" SPECIAL PROJECT
DOUJI SHIKI ILLUSTRATION COLLECTION



**ISSUE 4
OUT OF THE GATE
(OCTOBER 2002)**

"Sailor and Kaname"

This time it was the likeable character, Mr. Sailor, looking like Popeye.

A macho big guy and a cute girl are a good combination.



ISSUE 9 OUT OF THE GATE (MARCH 2003)

"Sousuke Fighting and the Heroines"

Sousuke being awesome, which is very rare. I wonder why?

"DVMC" was supposed to be a side-story-like comedy, but... the last part was true guns-blazing action. I wonder why? (lol)

Some faults with it are since I didn't have enough time, it doesn't have any background scenery, and Sousuke looks kind of like a little kid.



賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU

フルメタル・パニック! 6

FULL METAL PANIC!

轟るベリー・メリー・クリスマス



ファンタジア文庫

Translator's Afterword:

Wow, I almost can't believe that I'm actually done with this book. It feels like I've been working on it forever...

Anyway, I just wanted to talk a little about the series and this project. As I'm writing right now, the third FMP anime series, "The Second Raid" is set to come out this year. I can't tell you how excited I am... not only for the chance to watch this awesome story animated, but also for the fact that people were actually able to read the novels first. It's a great feeling to know that you've contributed, however small, in some way.

I won't disagree that this particular novel was fraught with difficulty, though, what with all the life-changing events that have taken place since I started working on it. But I want to thank everyone for sticking through it, not complaining (too much), and keeping your interest up. I think the biggest setback with this novel was the hard drive crash, causing me to lose a month's work. I was more mad at myself than anything for not backing it up properly, and redoing what I had lost was actually really grating, and I was worried that I might lose interest in it before I ever finished it. But I can say that it's quite a feeling of relief to be done.

A little more about the series: the next novel is entitled "Tsuzuku On My Own" (Continuing On My Own), and it is the first novel in the second part of the series. As stated by the author, the story's starting to change, and it's going to be full of surprises, so I hope everyone will look forward to the next translation.

Again, thanks everyone, for all your support and dedication. We here at Boku-tachi are always glad to hear from you, so stop in the channel sometime if

you want or need anything (check the website for the current channel address).

So until next time, when I follow Sousuke into hell first, then try to drag everyone else along with me :)

Brandi
March, 2005

Boku-tachi

<http://www.boku-tachi.net>

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